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THE BEHIND-THE-SCENES STORY OF

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Forward To The Past

After flipping through this month's issue, you might think *Game Informer* took a ride in a time machine back to the '90s. Pokémon is on the cover. Shenmue is a feature. Final Fantasy VII is our previews opener, and The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening is our Game of the Month for reviews. We are even talking about a new Hideo Kojima game.

For those keeping score at home, Pokémon hit in 1996, Shenmue in 1999, Final Fantasy VII was 1997, and Zelda hit in 1993. And the original Metal Gear Solid? Well that was 1998. So fire up "You Oughta Know" by Alanis Morissette, because the '90s are back!

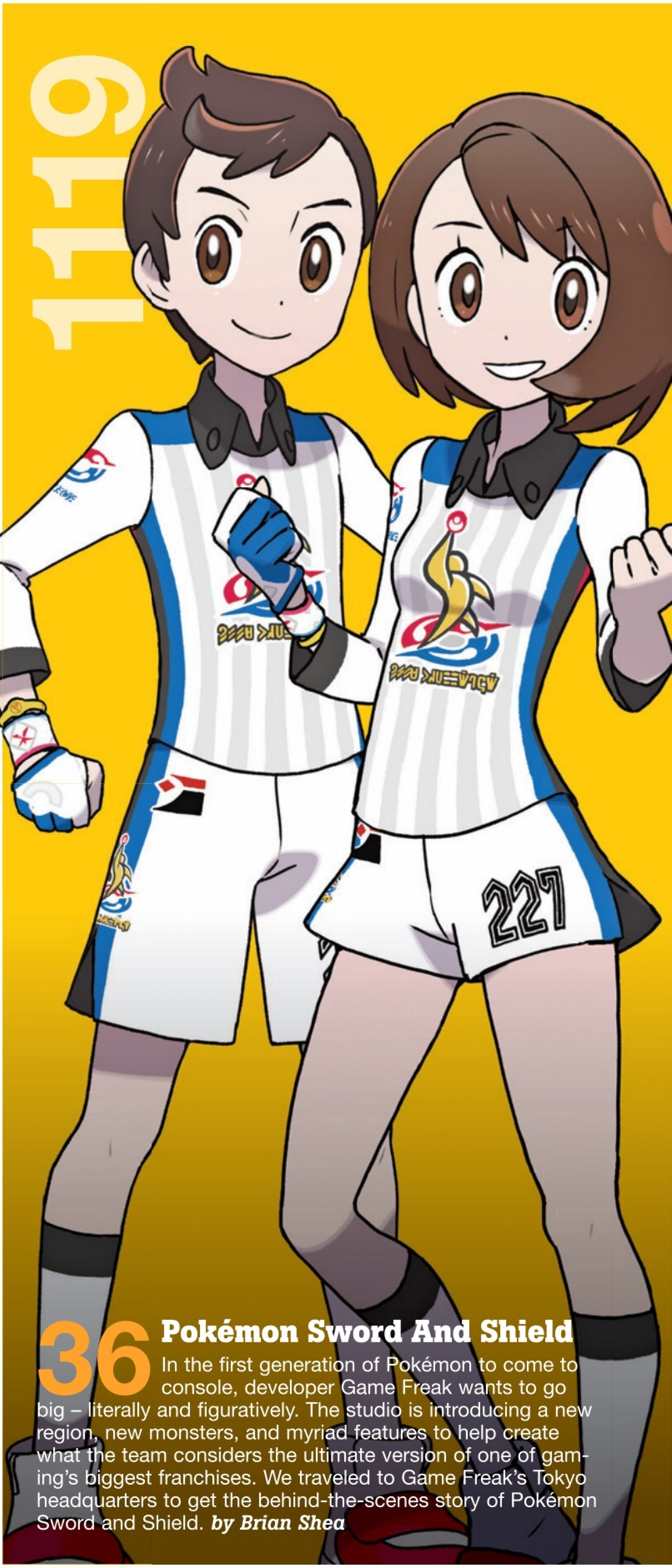
Gaming and nostalgia have worked hand-in-hand for a long time now, but I couldn't help but laugh a bit at how many greats of the past still live on to this day – and somehow all manage to converge in this one issue.

Of course, games have changed a ton since those heady days. Online multiplayer may be king now, but let's hope the game industry never forgets its past, and the love people have for the experiences that single-player titles bring to gamers everywhere. These experiences can literally endure decades, as this issue shows.

Game Informer was there when all those games released in the '90s, and we hope to be there when Pokémon Time and Space launches at a game store on Mars in 2042.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,



36 Pokémon Sword And Shield

In the first generation of Pokémon to come to console, developer Game Freak wants to go big – literally and figuratively. The studio is introducing a new region, new monsters, and myriad features to help create what the team considers the ultimate version of one of gaming's biggest franchises. We traveled to Game Freak's Tokyo headquarters to get the behind-the-scenes story of Pokémon Sword and Shield. ***by Brian Shea***

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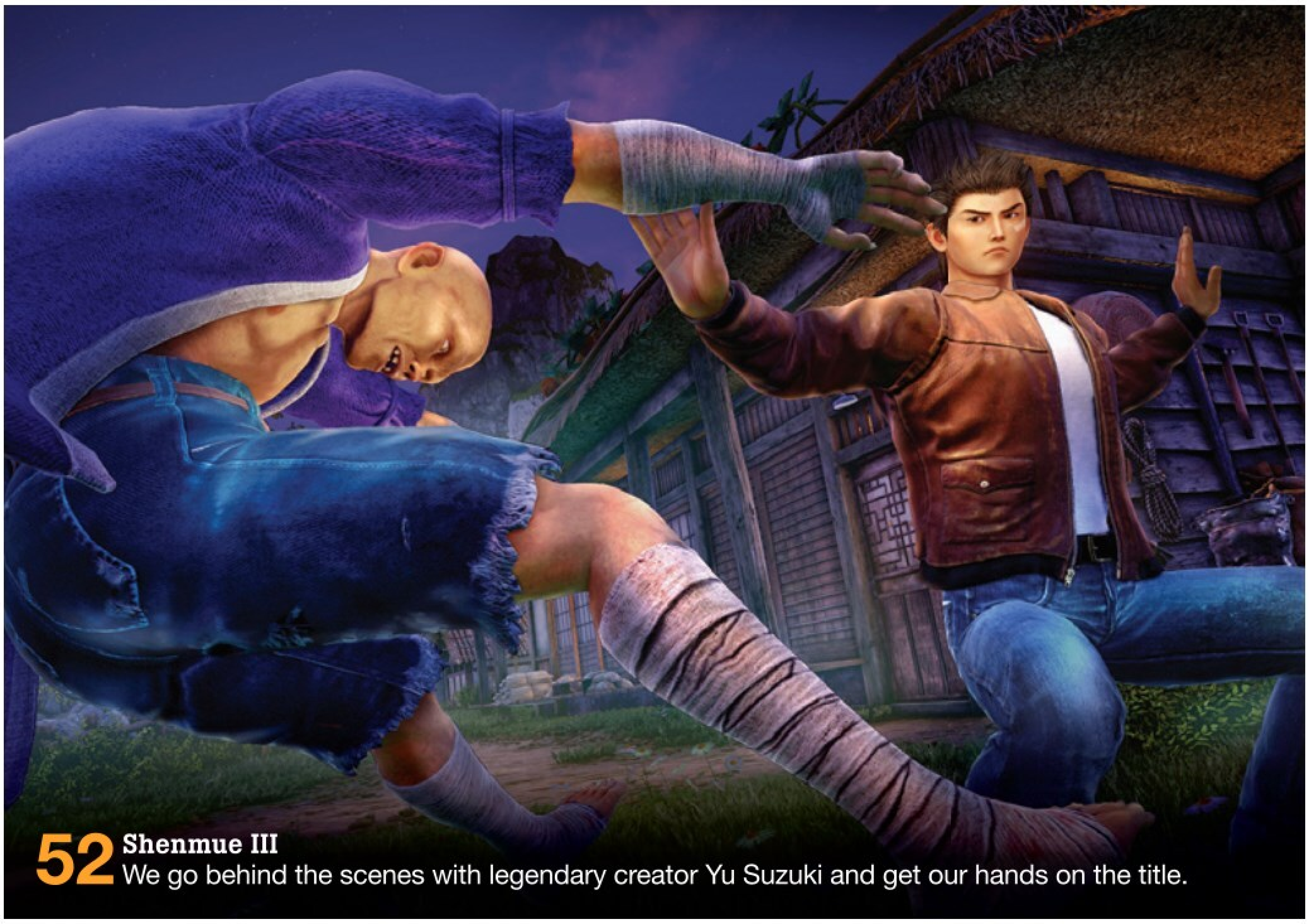

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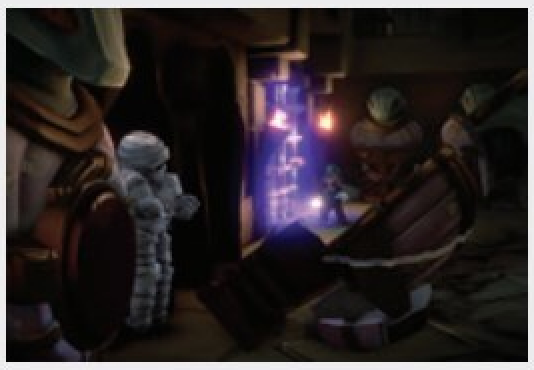

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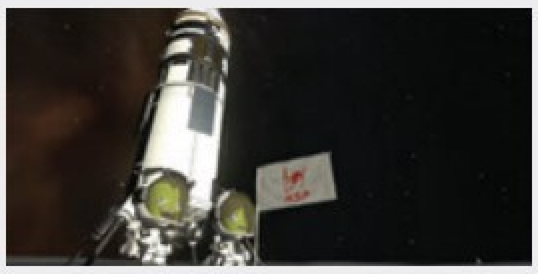
This five-player co-op/competitive spinoff title takes place in the Resident Evil universe.



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One more step beyond with the lovable, daring, and expendable green explorers.

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The game's reach is wide, but it doesn't necessarily execute in all departments.

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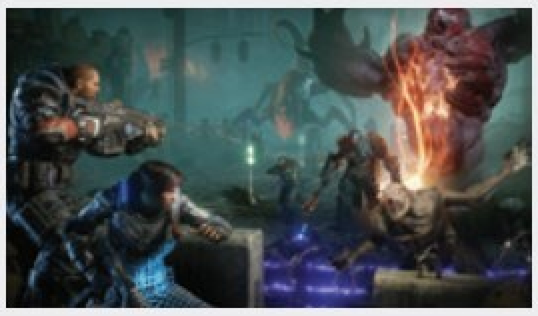
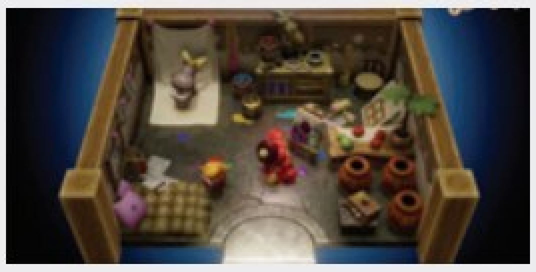
This entry doesn't fall far from the franchise tree – for better or worse.



86 Gears 5
The Coalition's second tour of duty with the franchise is familiar and fun.



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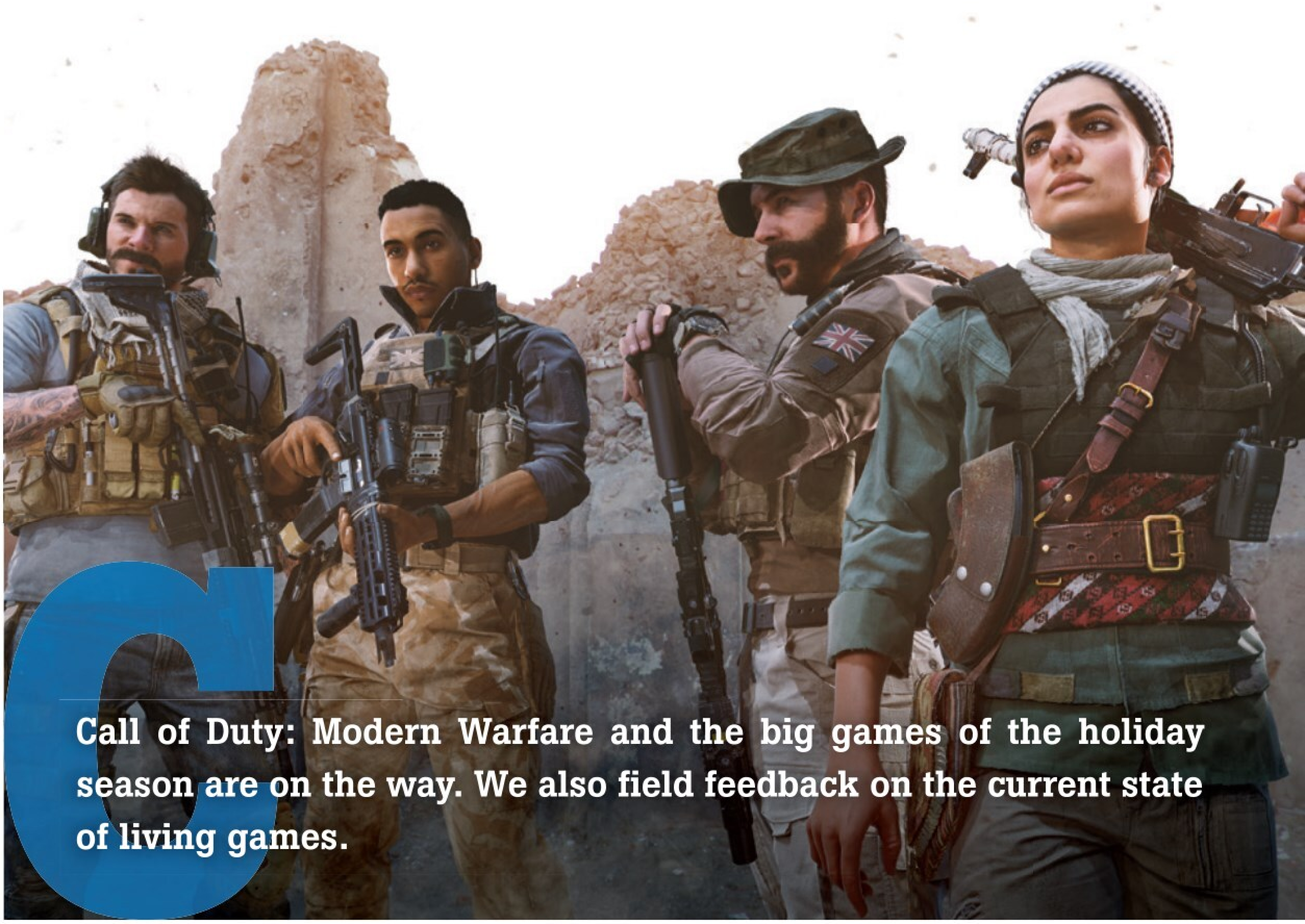


Call of Duty: Modern Warfare and the big games of the holiday season are on the way. We also field feedback on the current state of living games.

The Horrors Of War

I don't understand why people pick on Call of Duty. That series has been remarkably consistent year in and year out. I read your recent cover story on Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, and walked away knowing it would be a day-one purchase for me (as has been the case with all of this series' games), but I found myself a little concerned for the first time. Is this series becoming too realistic? Your article said the new single-player mode would have an "unblinking eye toward the harsh, gritty realities of all-too-often glorified war." The series has touched on difficult themes in the past, but still ended up being Rambo saving the world. It was fun and over-the-top. This just sound depressing and difficult.

Benjamin Oake
Orlando, FL

Modern Warfare's graphics look ridiculous. Do we really need a PlayStation 5 and Xbox Scarlett? I can't see games looking that much better than this.

Jamie Belle-Franks
via email

Am I the only one who hates that Activision is going back to square one with Modern Warfare? These reboots are getting confusing. Why not just call it something else or Modern Warfare: Something Something.

Casey Jelenik
via email

We hear you loud and clear on the naming conventions. In the long run, we'll probably end up calling this one Modern Warfare 2019. We won't know exactly what to make from the visual realism and reality of war until we get our hands on the full experience. As you pointed out, the series has been remarkably consistent, and it's still Activision's biggest focus each year.

Guilt Acknowledged

Forgive me *Game Informer* for I have sinned. Since I started playing Fortnite's Battle Royale, I have logged well over 500 hours into the game. My obsession began with a group of friends, but one by one, each of them moved on to other multiplayer games. I was beginning to think there may be something wrong with me for continuing to play it, and then I read your excellent "Lifeline of the Living Games" article, and saw that Fortnite received an A+ rating. You have no idea how happy this made me! As you so clearly put it, I am the one who is playing the best game out there, and my friends are the ones who foolishly abandoned it. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go rub the A+ grade in their faces, and devote another 500 hours of my life to this amazing game.

Tommy Lexington
Seattle, WA

You should never feel guilty for playing a game you love, unless it's Superman 64. We're glad you enjoyed the "Lifeline of the Living Games" roundup, and we'll likely check in on these games again a year from now to see how they are holding up. If you can sink 500 hours into a game and still look forward to playing it the next day, the developer is on to something great. You aren't alone in your dedication to Fortnite. It's still the most popular game in the world.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

The Great Kojima Mystery

Can you tell me what type of game Death Stranding is? It looks weird.

Bonkers the Clown
via email

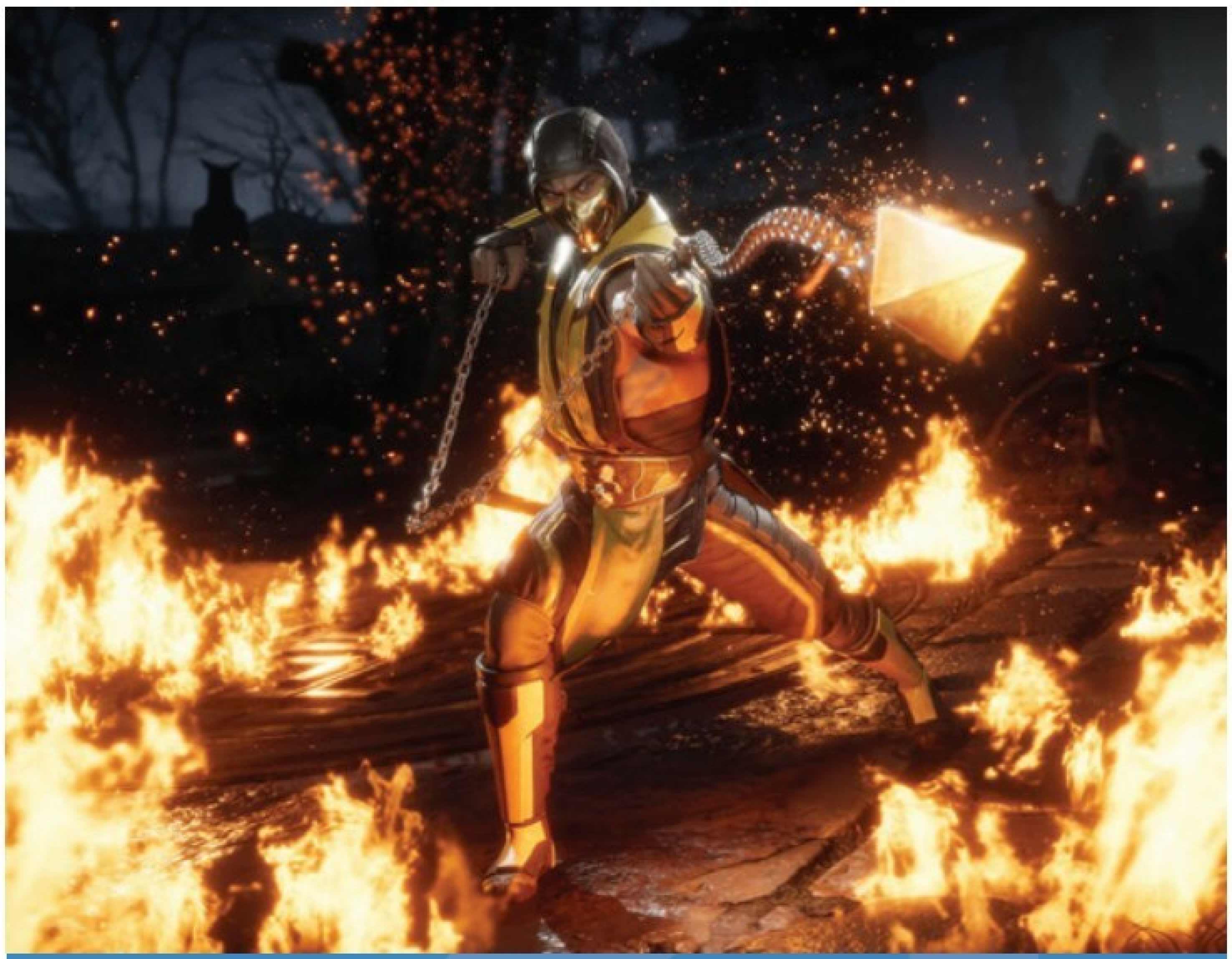
It's an open-world action game. Wait … We THINK it's an open-world action game. The only defined actions we've seen are napping, urinating, and running. We'll find out if there's more to it than that when it releases on November 8. Is it exciting or concerning that we don't know more about the gameplay this close to release?

Are Living Games Destroying The Industry?

I often get angry when a game doesn't feel like it was worth $60. As you pointed out in your "Lifeline of the Living Games" article, developers are trying to keep people playing for as long as possible, which is great from a value perspective, but if more people keep playing the same games, doesn't that mean less games are being purchased overall? Are living games killing the video game industry?

Lucas Waters
via email

There's no doubt some players are buying fewer games overall, but the number of players and games sold continues to rise year after year. Yes, Fortnite may steal away a considerable amount of revenue from other publishers, but they've adapted and found ways to attract gamers to purchases. The landscape of gaming is always changing, and it can be confusing at times, but the industry is still strong and moving in the right direction.



Confused By Video Game Marketing

I've been a *Game Informer* reader for 15 years. Back then, the games debuting on your publication's covers wouldn't hit retail shelves for at least a year later. Nowadays it seems like games aren't announced this early. The latest Mortal Kombat and Far Cry games were released just a few months after their announcements. Apex Legends didn't even get an announcement. EA released it on the same day it was revealed. Why less marketing? It seems like companies would want to build up some kind of hype for these games that cost millions to make.

Cathy Anderson
via email

Why advertise on billboards, TV stations, and websites for months when you can get one hour of Ninja's time for the same price! That's meant to be a joke, but in truth, influencers are a big part of marketing campaigns now. Many marketing campaigns are shorter in length, hoping that a big day of visibility will build up enough momentum to carry a game. Apex Legends is a prime example of how this can work. The beauty of advertising is that publishers can go big for a long campaign (as we still see with some games), or take over streaming channels for a week or a day.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Who would win in a fight: Kratos or Nathan Drake?"

That's easy. Nathan Drake. No, we don't need to explain why. Think about it.

"Use one word to describe how awesome it is that Overwatch is coming to Switch."

Awesome!

"My mom won't let me spend money on loot boxes in any game. Is this fair?"

More than fair, unless you want to feel disappointment with each click of the button.

Unsolicited Reader Advice:

"They can't catch you if you wear Nike Air Max 270."

Question Of The Month:

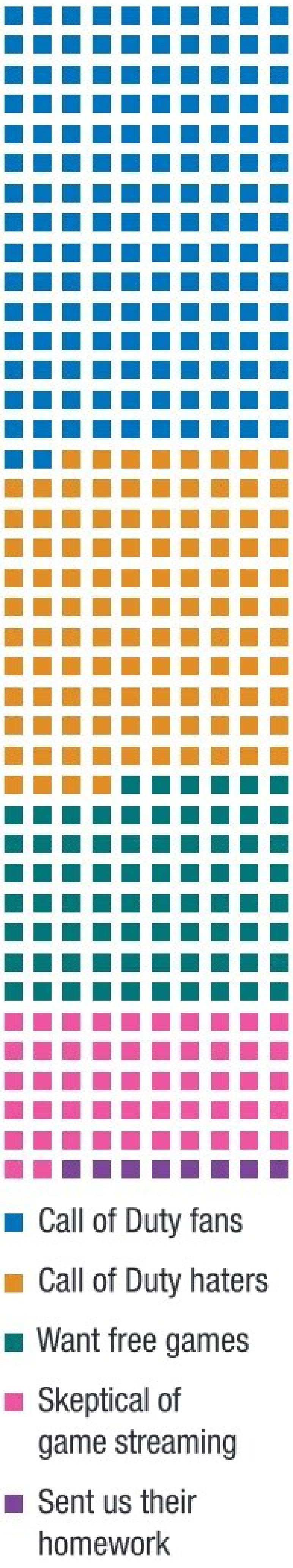
What's the game you've sunk the most hours into?

gi spy

(Left) This month, we traveled to Game Freak's Tokyo headquarters to get the behind-the-scenes story of Pokémon Sword and Shield from director Shigeru Ohmori, art director James Turner, and producer Junichi Masuda. **(Right)** While at Game Freak, we also caught up with the developers of Little Town Hero. Check out our preview on page 69.

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



Marvel Is Blowing It

I'm 50 years old, and have been an avid movie theater person for as long as I can remember. The most fun I've had at the theater has been watching the Marvel Cinematic Universe come to life and evolve into a continuing story shared by dozens of characters. Why can't we have this in video games? I thought Sony's Spider-Man game could have been the bedrock for a big Marvel Game Universe (MGU), but the Avengers game doesn't look like it connects, and Marvel Ultimate Alliance certainly isn't tied to it. This seems like easy money to me. Just do what you did on the movie screen, Marvel!

Hershel
via email

As amazing as it would be to see Captain America or Wolverine appear in a Spider-Man game sequel and then spin out into their own series, you have to remember that Spider-Man is a PlayStation exclusive. With console exclusives being a thing, connecting the story across games would be difficult. Yes, Marvel could work out deals with developers that publish on ALL systems, but if you think Spider-Man should be the start, it's already alienating a large portion of the audience.

What If...

In issue 317, we asked readers what one thing they wished all developers would think about when making their games.

How not to screw over gamers with microtransactions. Seriously.

Noah "will never buy your loot crates" Snyder

I'm growing increasingly more disenchanted with games from their tutorials. I know that sounds weird, but I purchased GreedFall and before I even knew who my character was or what the world was I found myself in a lengthy combat tutorial learning how to parry and break guards. Developers need to ease up on the tutorials out of the gates. Give your players some credit. We can figure out how to hit all of the buttons and can usually read what they do. There's a time and place for explanation – it doesn't always have to be right away.

Jenessa Howard

This is a small thing. Emotional sequences in games can sometimes be destroyed by an achievement or trophy popping up just as something dramatic is happening. You'd think developers would know better, but this happens all of the time.

The G.O.A.T

The one thing I hope they ask themselves (a lot) is what value does a silent protagonist have? If there's any kind of storytelling and the characters around the protagonist speak, it just seems strange to not respond. The "we want the player to respond with their own words" response doesn't hold weight anymore. Games are immersive stories now. We want to become the character to be a part of that.

Sebastian Veel

(Left) Planning director Kazumasa Iwao also swung by to talk about the development of Pokémon Sword and Shield with Ben Hanson and Brian Shea. **(Right)** Fox McCloud makes his best Brian Shea face.

WINNER

1 Christopher Morales
Persona 5 Royal's Kasumi Yoshizawa is a great new addition to the Phantom Thieves; she's already stolen our hearts!

2 Joel Cruz
Say what you will about Doomguy, but he sure has great taste in reading material.

3 Madison Roth
Normally, we'd recommend stepping away from the TNT. With this much HP, however, we should be safe.

4 Nate Hall
Akira Toriyama's creations battle over who he likes more. At least, that's what we're assuming is going on here.

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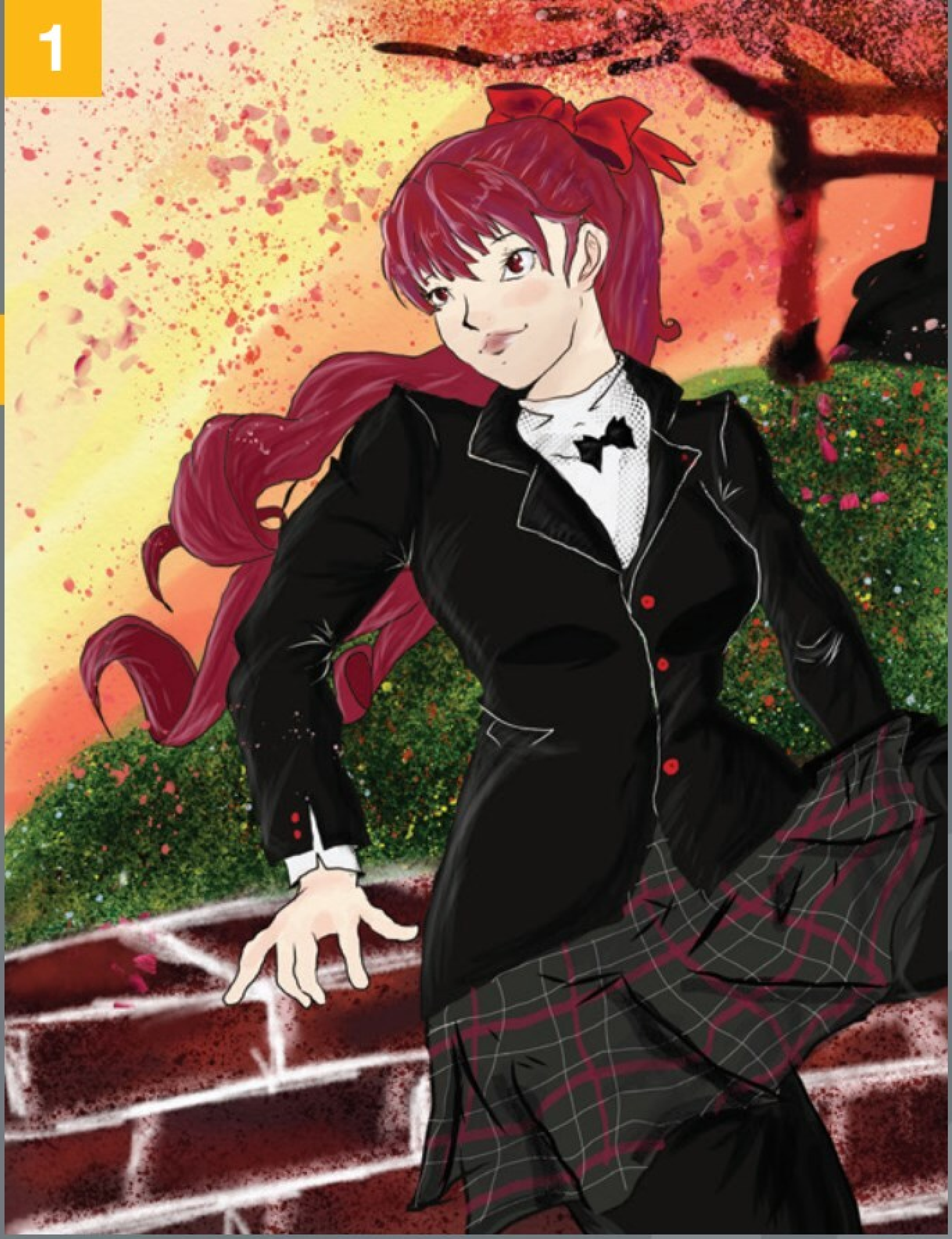

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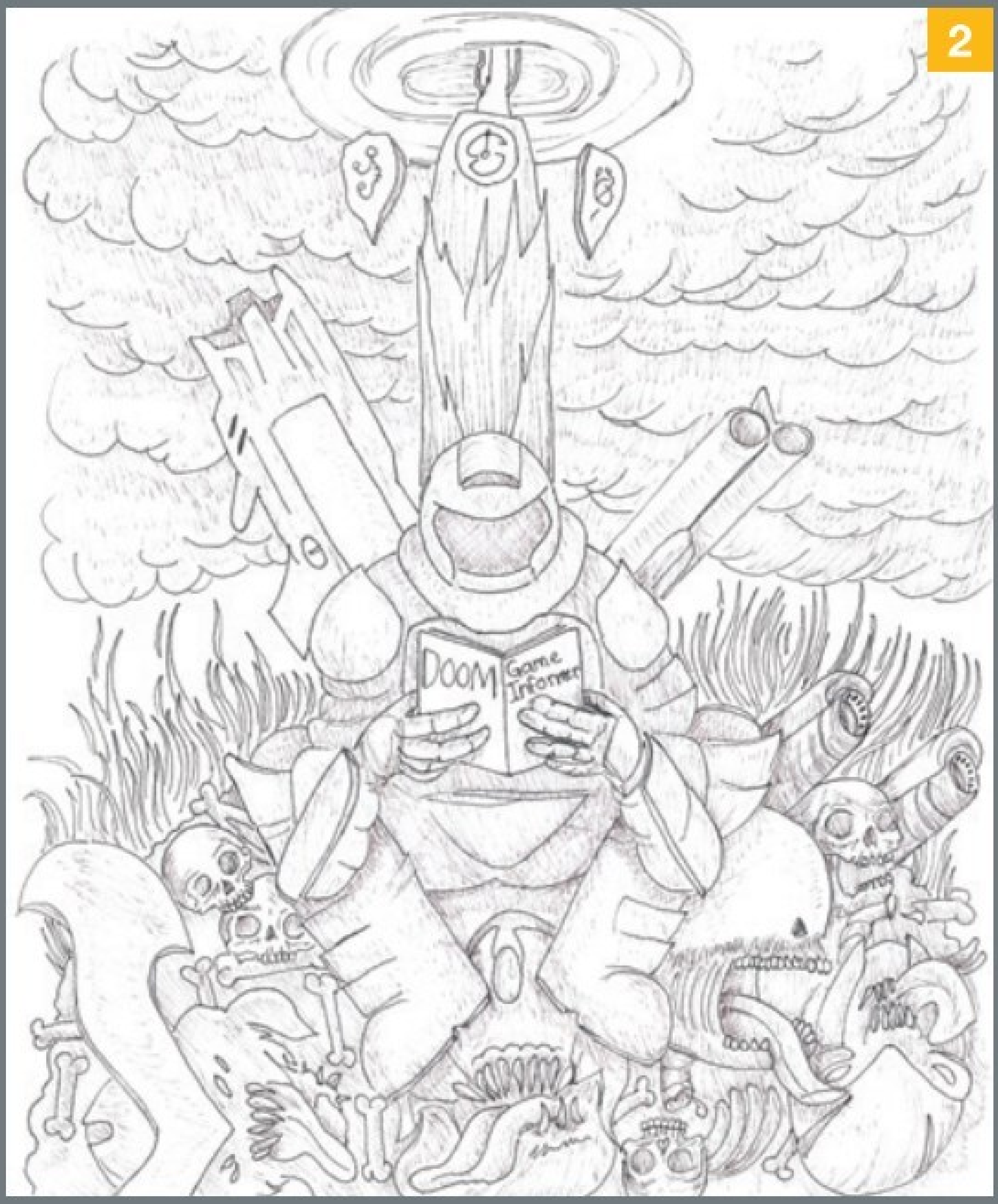

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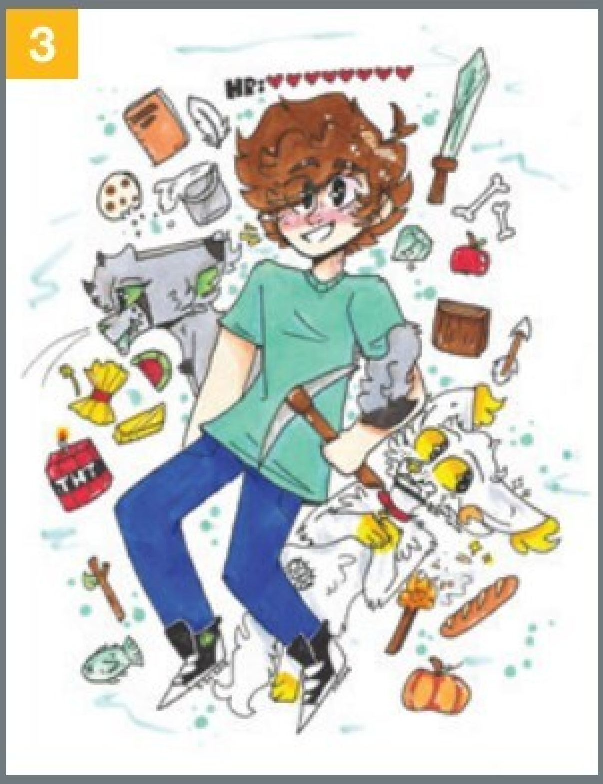

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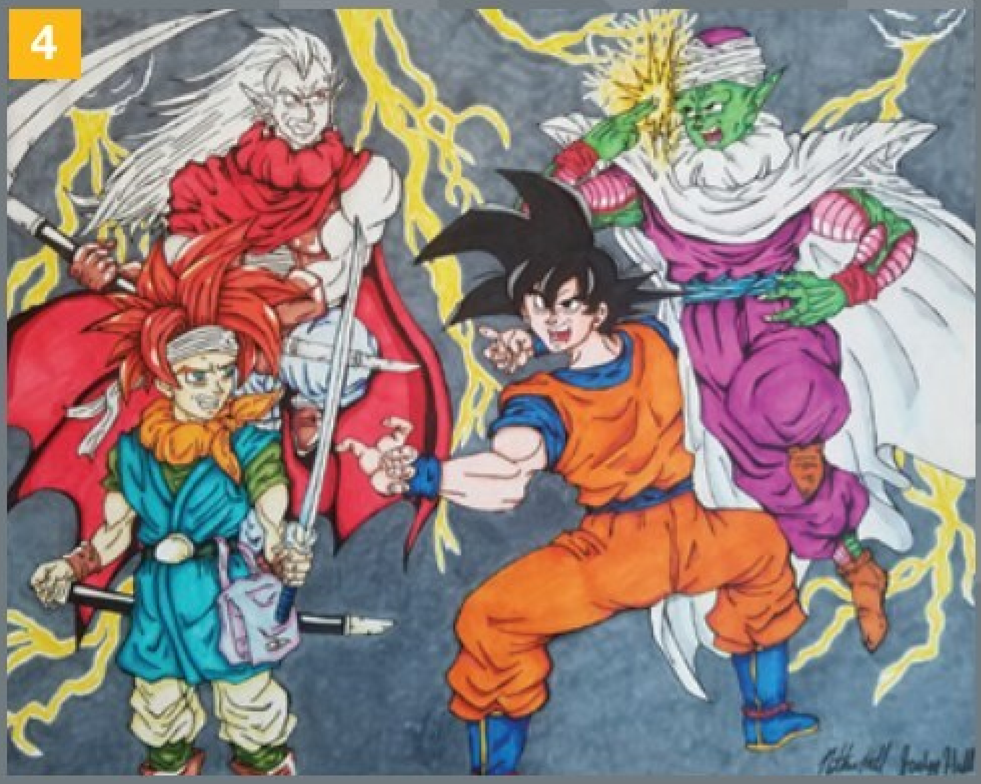

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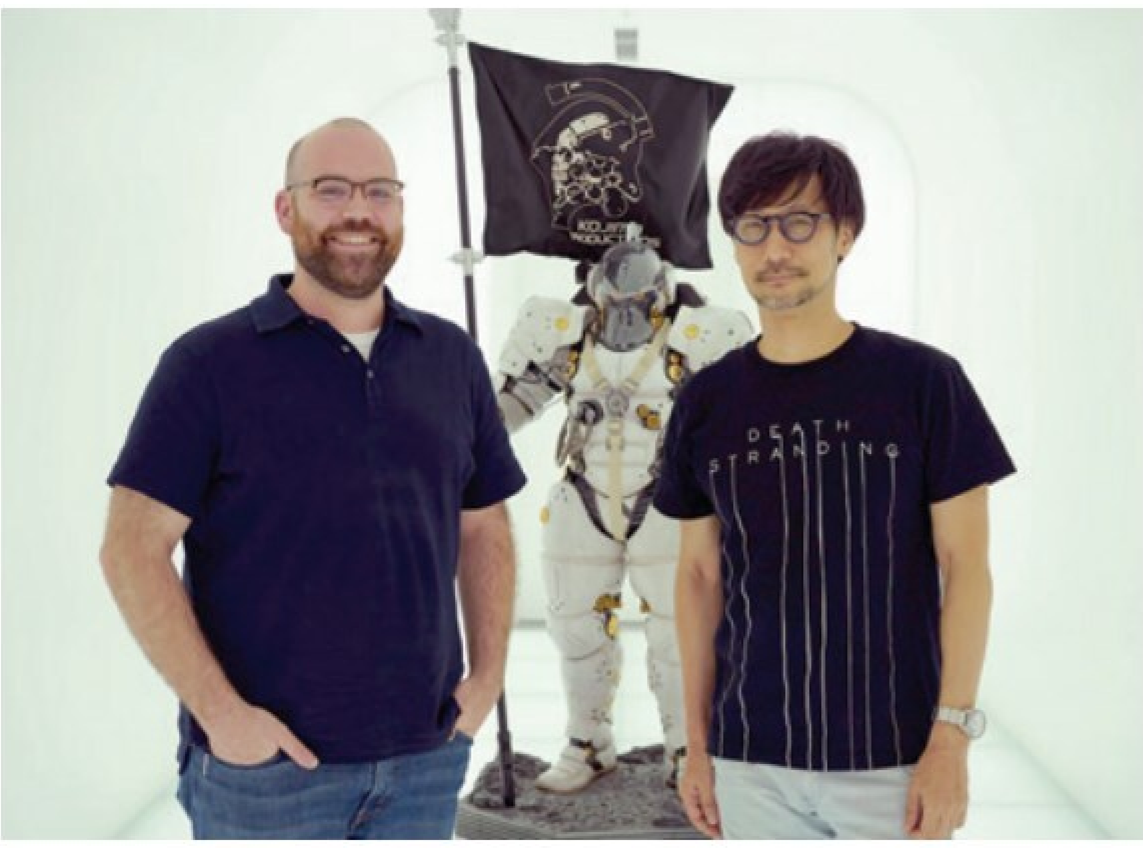
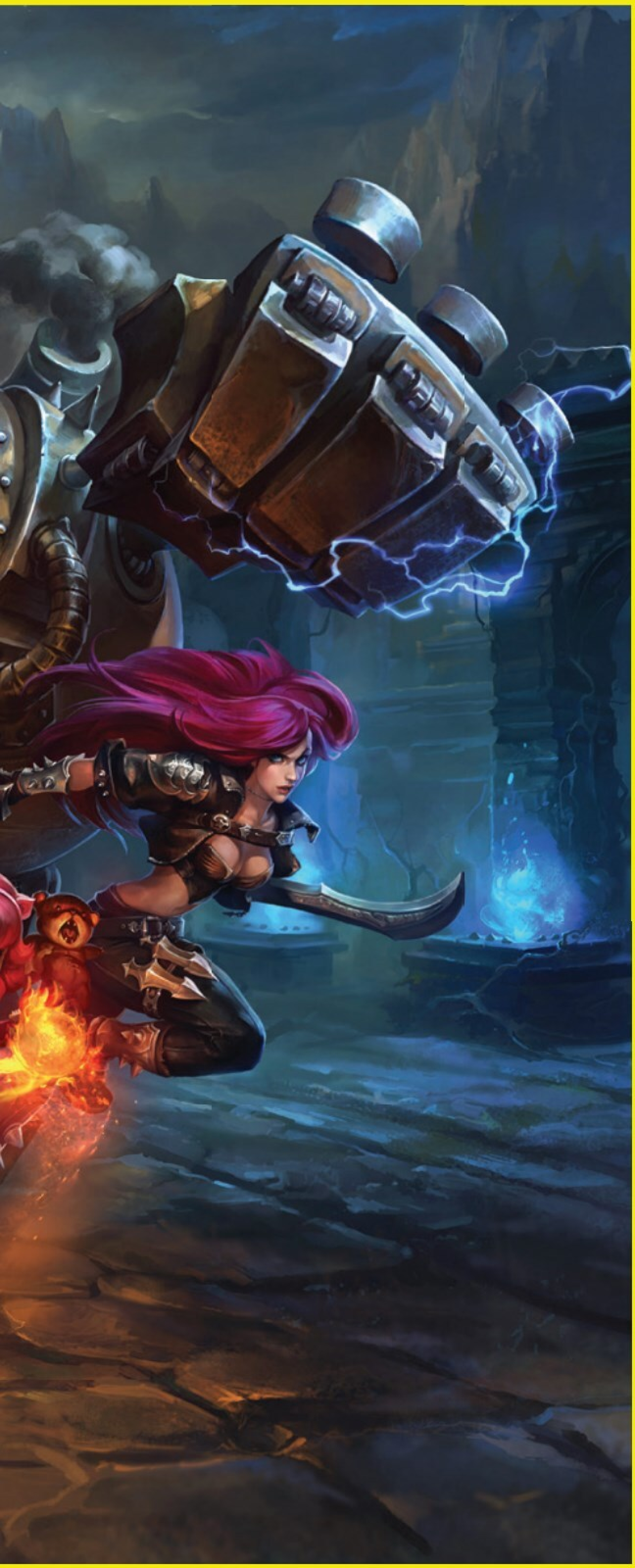


(Left) Shenmue III director Yu Suzuki and executive producer Hideaki Morishita experience their first "Double Ben" hug. They said it was life changing. **(Right)** Joe Juba just replaced Geoff Keighley as Hideo Kojima's best friend.

BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES

The challenges of moderating online games and why the industry isn't giving up



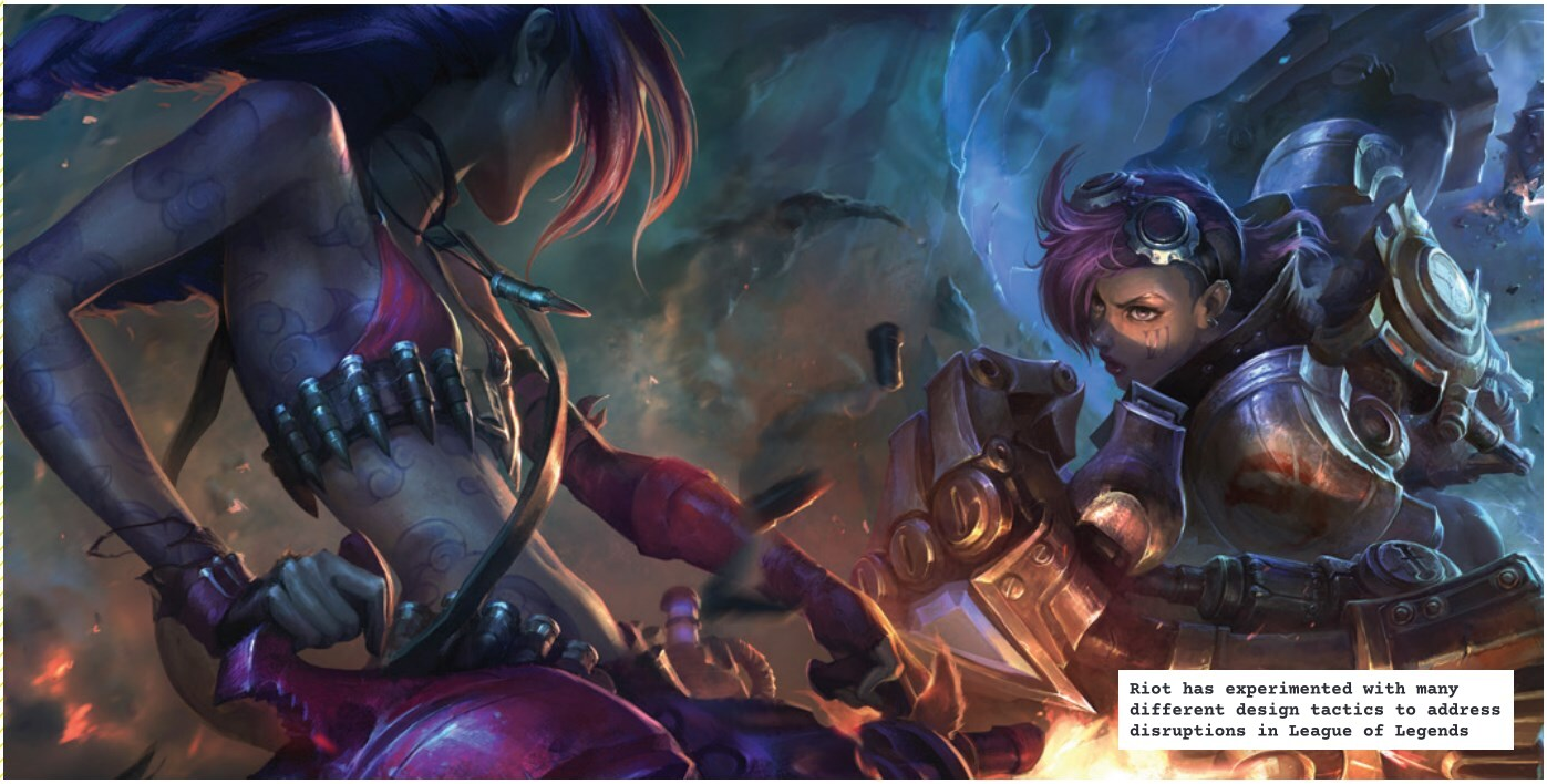
by Kimberley Wallace

Ever play an online game and feel your blood pressure rise over complete frustration with poor sportsmanship, or even worse felt your anxiety spike due to harassment and bullying taking place right before your eyes?

A game is only as strong as the community that supports it, but what happens when a few bad apples disrupt the flow and prevent others from having fun? Most gamers have a story where they've experienced griefing or team-killing, or even worse had another player verbally insult them in a way that goes well beyond "trash talk." In fact, a recent study by anti-bullying organization Ditch the Label reported that 57 percent of the young people it surveyed experienced bullying online while playing games; even more alarming was 22 percent said it caused them to stop playing. Instead of drawing people to games, are more people turning away from them due to these unpleasant social interactions?

Negative experiences playing games online aren't anything new; you can go back to the earlier days of commercial MMORPGs, such as EverQuest and Ultima Online, and find plenty of examples of these scenarios. A common perception among gamers has been it just comes with the territory if you want to play online, but that doesn't make it okay. Playing games should bring people together, and as gamers, we all know how powerful these experiences can be. Nobody should have to tolerate hate speech or threats to their safety to simply engage with their hobby online.

This issue has only continued to heat up as more games are evolving and becoming online-centric. The extra emphasis on their social aspects has forced developers to get creative to help encourage players to "play nice." With more initiatives and efforts in this area, we chatted with leaders across the industry, from developers figuring out solutions to companies that specialize in moderation, to gain insight into the ever-growing and complex issue.



Riot has experimented with many different design tactics to address disruptions in League of Legends

IT'S ABOUT DISRUPTION

The word "toxic" seems to go hand-in-hand with online gaming and has been used as a way to describe problematic, negative players who go out of their way to make the experience unpleasant for others. Maybe it's a player who's purposely throwing a match in Dota 2, or spamming insults in League of Legends' chat to make someone feel bad about their skills. This is what many developers consider "disruptive behavior" and is the preferred term when discussing these types of individuals.

No matter the phrasing, it still all comes down to one thing: They are getting in the way of how the game is meant to be experienced. Every developer we spoke to for this feature commented on this specifically and why it's a bummer. "It's in everyone's best interest to make playing their games a fun, happy experience because that's why people go to play these games – they want to have a fun time," says Overwatch principal designer Scott Mercer.

This also extends to keeping players invested in a gaming experience. If something doesn't feel fun or pleasant, why stick around? Dave McCarthy, head of operations at Xbox, puts forth a simple comparison to illustrate how important it is that these digital landscapes feel safe and protected: "I just think it's as simple as, 'Would you walk into a physical space, anywhere where you face harassment, or are made to feel unwelcome by certain imagery or language that's used there?' No, of course you wouldn't; you get out of that space physically. And the same is true for the digital space."

When players log into games, they look for the social norms to get an idea of what's acceptable. Is it a more laid back, jokey atmosphere? Is it composed of serious competitors wanting to get down to business? That's why it's extremely important the tone is set early in games and services. Chris Priebe, founder and CEO of Two Hat Security, a company that provides moderation tools, says that a community's identity forms on day one and that's why it's so important for those behind the games to build and inform the culture. "When people launch a game, they need to be thinking about, 'How am I building the community and putting people in the community?' I think too often in the game industry it's just, 'Launch it and the culture will form itself.'"

Priebe discussed how oftentimes moderation and chat features are thought about far too late in development, without much consideration going into how to shape the community. He compared it to hosting a party and how it takes shape once you set the tone. "If you don't set a tone, it can go very, very poorly," Priebe says. "That's why people have bouncers at the front door. Somehow with games we don't think we need to put bouncers at the front door, and we wonder why things go so terribly wrong."

While this might seem discouraging, in more recent years. Priebe says he has seen an increased effort going into changing this. People across the industry are working hard to find answers, whether that's more transparent guidelines, better moderation tools, or designing solutions within the game. However, it all comes with time and experience, using the community as a testing ground.

Overwatch

THE LEARNING PROCESS

The more people we spoke to about this topic, the more it was clear how complicated and difficult of an issue it is. Most companies are experimenting with different features or tools to see what works, and some are even still deciding where to draw the line between "okay" and "not okay." "It turns out that calling something toxic is difficult to design for," says Weszt Hart, head of player dynamics at Riot Games. "It's difficult to make decisions on, because it's so subjective. What's toxic to you might not be toxic to somebody else. Trash talk could be for some people considered toxic, but for others, that's just what we do with our friends."

Working on League of Legends, a team-based game that earned quite a reputation for its toxic community, Hart says it was challenging for the team to figure out where to focus to mitigate these issues. To figure out what the community considered "good" and "bad," Riot presented the now-defunct Tribunal, where players logged in and reviewed cases, deciding if an offender should be disciplined or pardoned. After this, Riot tried encouraging more positive interactions by rolling out the honor system, a way to give your teammate kudos if you thought they did a good job. "But then we realized that all of those systems were after-the-fact, they were all after the games," Hart explains. "They weren't helping to avoid potential transgressions. We needed to identify where the problems were actually happening, maybe even before games."

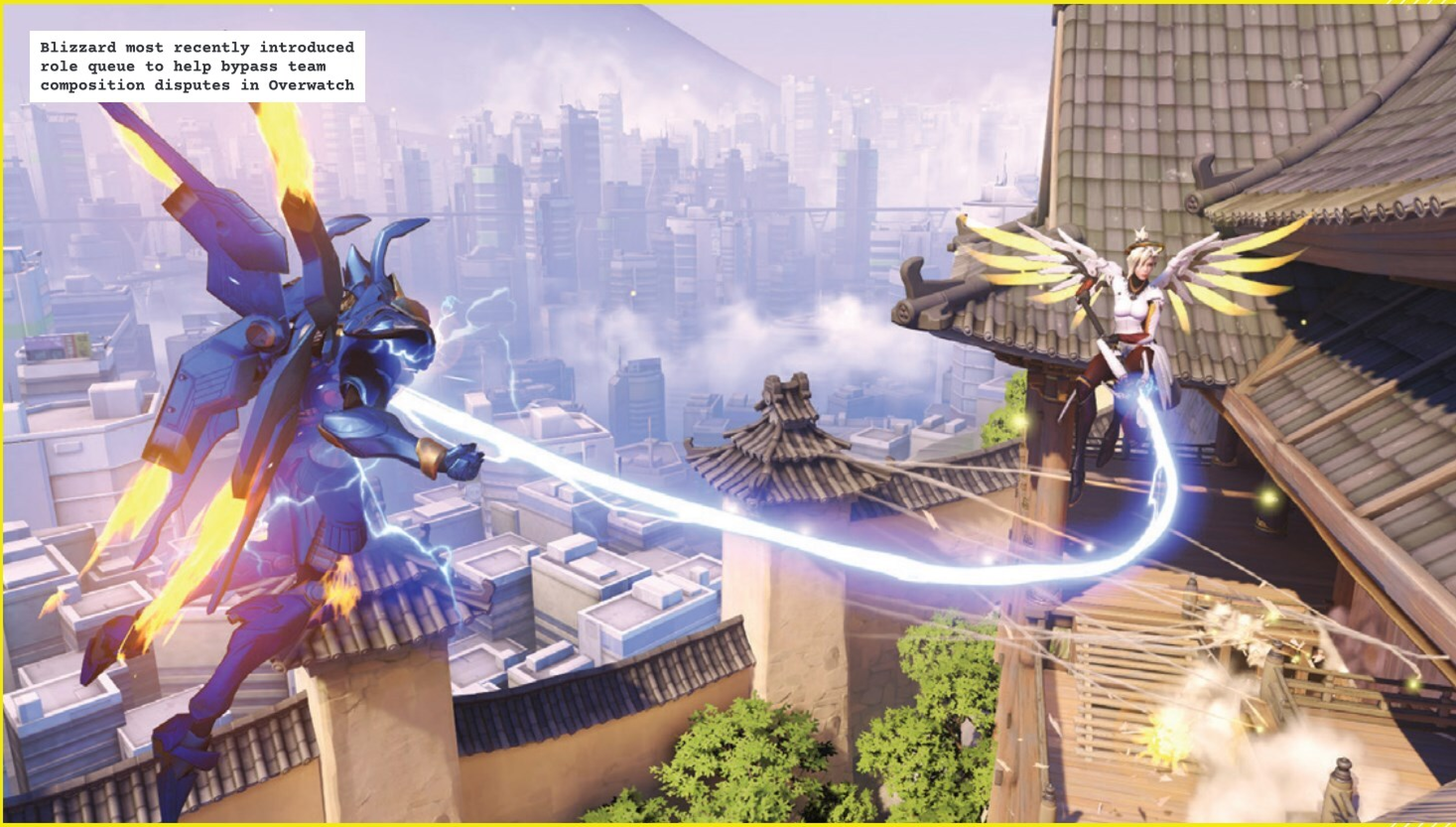
Enter team builder. "Team builder was looking at addressing, I suppose a way to put it is, a shortcoming of our design," Hart says. "Because as the community evolved, the concept of a meta evolved with it. Players started telling us how to play and the system wasn't recognizing their intent, so in an effort to play the way they wanted to play, they were essentially yelling out in chat the role that they wanted. We needed to find a way to help the system, help players play the way they wanted." Riot created team builder for matches to start out on a better note, as a way to decrease players entering matches already frustrated, which often just increased the chance of negative interactions.

While Riot isn't the first to deal with players treating each other poorly, the influence of its systems can be seen around the industry. Take Blizzard's cooperative shooter Overwatch, for example. Overwatch launched back in 2016, and while being considered one of the more positive communities, it dealt with its share of problem players, which game director Jeff Kaplan often had to address in his developer update videos. Kaplan finally put it bluntly: "Our highest-level philosophy is, if you are a bad person doing bad things in Overwatch, we don't want you in Overwatch."

The Fair Play Alliance's Mission

As developers seek solutions, it's become apparent that collaboration is going to be a huge tool moving forward. Here's where The Fair Play Alliance, a global coalition of game companies, plans to "unlock the best possible online experiences for players everywhere." Over 120 companies are represented with a great mix of key players around the industry, such as Blizzard, Mixer, Roblox, and Epic Games. "The [Fair Play] Alliance is about driving lasting change for game design" says co-founder Carlos Figueiredo, who also is the director of community safety and trust at Two Hat Security.

With an eye toward making games more "positive and productive experiences," The Fair Play Alliance is in place to detect problems before they snowball. "Something people can miss is the way you design your game can be conducive to the experience," Figueiredo says. "The environment in the game can influence negative behavior. This is at the very top mind of the Alliance … if you really think about game design and how it can be used to facilitate and foster those positive interactions." The goal is to better understand the needs of players and how to ensure online games are a positive experience for everyone." For more information, visit fairplayalliance.org.



Blizzard most recently introduced role queue to help bypass team composition disputes in Overwatch

Since launch, Overwatch has received several improvements to the game: better reporting tools, an endorsement system encouraging positivity, and most recently, role queue, which took away the extra frustration and bickering that often erupted over team composition. The latter two are very reminiscent of League's honor system and team builder.

Overwatch is far from Blizzard's first foray into the world of online gaming, so the team anticipated some issues, but it also charted new territory. "I don't think we were expecting exactly the sort of behavior that happened after launch," says senior producer Andrew Boyd. "I know that there were a lot of new things for us to deal with. I think this is one of the first games where we're really dealing with voice as an integrated part of the game, and that changed the landscape a lot. That said, when we saw it, obviously, addressing those issues became very important to us very quickly, and we started to take steps to make the game a better place for folks."

While developers can try to catch potential issues ahead of time, most of the time they really don't expose themselves until the game is up and running. Ubisoft Montreal experienced this first-hand with Rainbow Six Siege, forcing the company to crack down on bad behavior and get creative with its solutions. A player behavior team was created to "focus on promoting the behaviors we hope to see in the game," says community developer Karen Lee. It's here that the team worked on Reverse Friendly Fire (RFF) system to help with team-killing. "RFF was first concepted to help contain the impact of players abusing the game's friendly fire mechanic," Lee says.

RFF makes it so if you attempt to harm an ally, the damage reverses straight back to you. Since then, Ubisoft has iterated on it to ensure it works on all the different operators and their gadgets. Now, before any new operators go live, the player-behavior team reviews it, trying to determine all the ways they could be used unintentionally by the community to cause griefing. "We also have weekly and monthly reports that go out to the entire team," Lee explains. "These help everyone gauge the health of the community, and we highlight the top concerns from the week."

Many different game companies and organizations have been coming together [see The Fair Play Alliance sidebar on page 13] to share ideas and work toward change. Even though developers have learned much of what works and what doesn't, there isn't a one-size-fits-all solution, as all games are different, whether it's the audience or genre. "The problem space is too big to look at any particular feature, and say, 'This is how you do it,'" Hart says. "There aren't best practices yet for what we're calling player dynamics, which is the field of design for player-to-player interactions and motivations. Depending on your game and your genre, some things may work better than others."

Rainbow Six Siege's developer updates openly discuss toxicity and the solutions going forward

PUTTING THE POWER IN THE COMMUNITY

Building healthier communities doesn't just fall on the developers and publishers. Sure, designing different mechanics and improving moderation tools are steps in the right direction, but they also need the community's help to be successful. It makes sense. The people that play your game make it what it is and know it the best. That's why more and more developers and companies are depending on their communities to give feedback and self-moderate by reporting bad player behavior. "Everyone needs to be involved," Priebe says. "The gamers need to say, 'Look, I'm sick of this.'" Priebe was quick to point out that he thinks most gamers already feel this way but feels more need to put their foot down and be vocal to help shift the culture. "It will take some gamers to say, 'No, that isn't cool. You can't be in our guild unless you have good sportsmanship,'" he says.

Many believe the community should be just as involved with the process as they are when giving feedback on games for betas. "We need to work with our players and say, 'What do you guys think?' The same way we do when we develop our games," says EA community team senior director Adam Tanielian. "We think the same idea should apply to our communities. How do we keep them healthy? And how do we build tools?" EA recently held a summit devoted to building healthier communities to start getting feedback from gamers and devs alike. Born from this was a "player council," which Tenielian says meets regularly and is similar to the ones they have for their various franchises, but this focuses on feedback for tools, policies, and how EA should categorize toxicity. "We know that we have to take action," Tanielian says. "We can't just talk about it and not do something. Some things take longer than others, but there are always things we can be doing. There are always areas that we can be addressing."

Many people we chatted with discussed how easy-to-use reporting tools have been essential, but players need to be encouraged to use them. If they're hard to find, require players to visit a website, or are needlessly complex, developers and moderators simply won't get the valuable information they need. Reporting also helps developers learn what the community values. "The community itself is sort of driving what's good and what's not great for it in terms of communication, in terms of that play experience," Mercer says. "I think the most important thing about the reporting is it's a way for the community to help police itself, to help determine amongst itself what they find acceptable or not."

Streaming, Gaming, And Mixer's Example

Mixer has become a big force in the streaming world, which was only amplified by a partnership with Tyler "Ninja" Blevins, who has now amassed over 1 million followers on the platform. Gaming and streaming are so intertwined that it's a big part of how people discover games nowadays. That means the needs of moderation are only increasing in these areas both for streamers and their viewers.

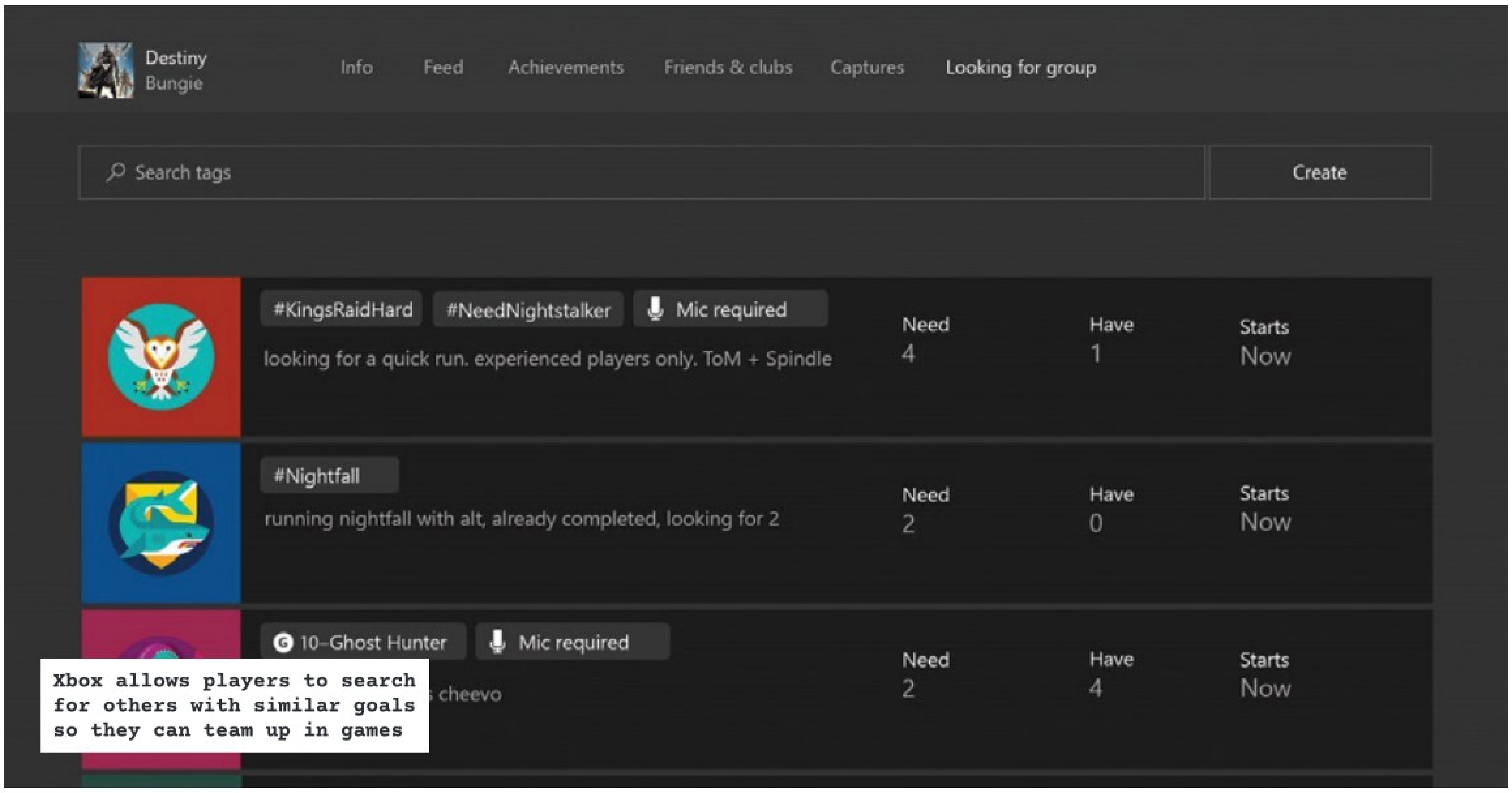
Mixer came onto the scene back in 2016 when it was called Beam, and it has taken a stance against toxicity and vowed to improve tools to help combat it. The entire tone of Mixer has been much more friendly and inviting than its competitors. General manager Chad Gibson thinks it comes down to Mixer's focus on community from day one and thinking about ways to foster it. "If there was one thing that's probably had the most profound impact, it's been transparency and consistency," he says. This means making the rules of what's acceptable as clear as possible and constantly striving to improve upon that.

Mixer just recently launched a new system called Toxicity Screen, which allows streamers to determine the words and type of communication that is allowed in their chat. Streamers can also fine-tune it to be more restrictive to new members and loosen it for longtime viewers they've built a trust with. "It's important for us to give the streamers the ability and the tools to foster the type of growth they want," Gibson explains.

Gibson thinks Mixer openly speaking out against toxicity has only helped it achieve the community it wants to foster. "We want it to be really clear what is allowed on the platform, and the more we can be consistent about this, the better our streamers can help push their community in that direction as well."

GAME CHANGERS
EA

EA community team senior director Adam Tanielian speaks at the Building Healthy Communities Summit at this year's EA Play



#KingsRaidHard #NeedNightstalker Mic required
looking for a quick run. experienced players only. ToM + Spindle
Need 4 Have 1 Starts Now

#Nightfall
running nightfall with alt, already completed, looking for 2
Need 2 Have 0 Starts Now

10-Ghost Hunter Mic required
cheevo
Need 2 Have 4 Starts Now

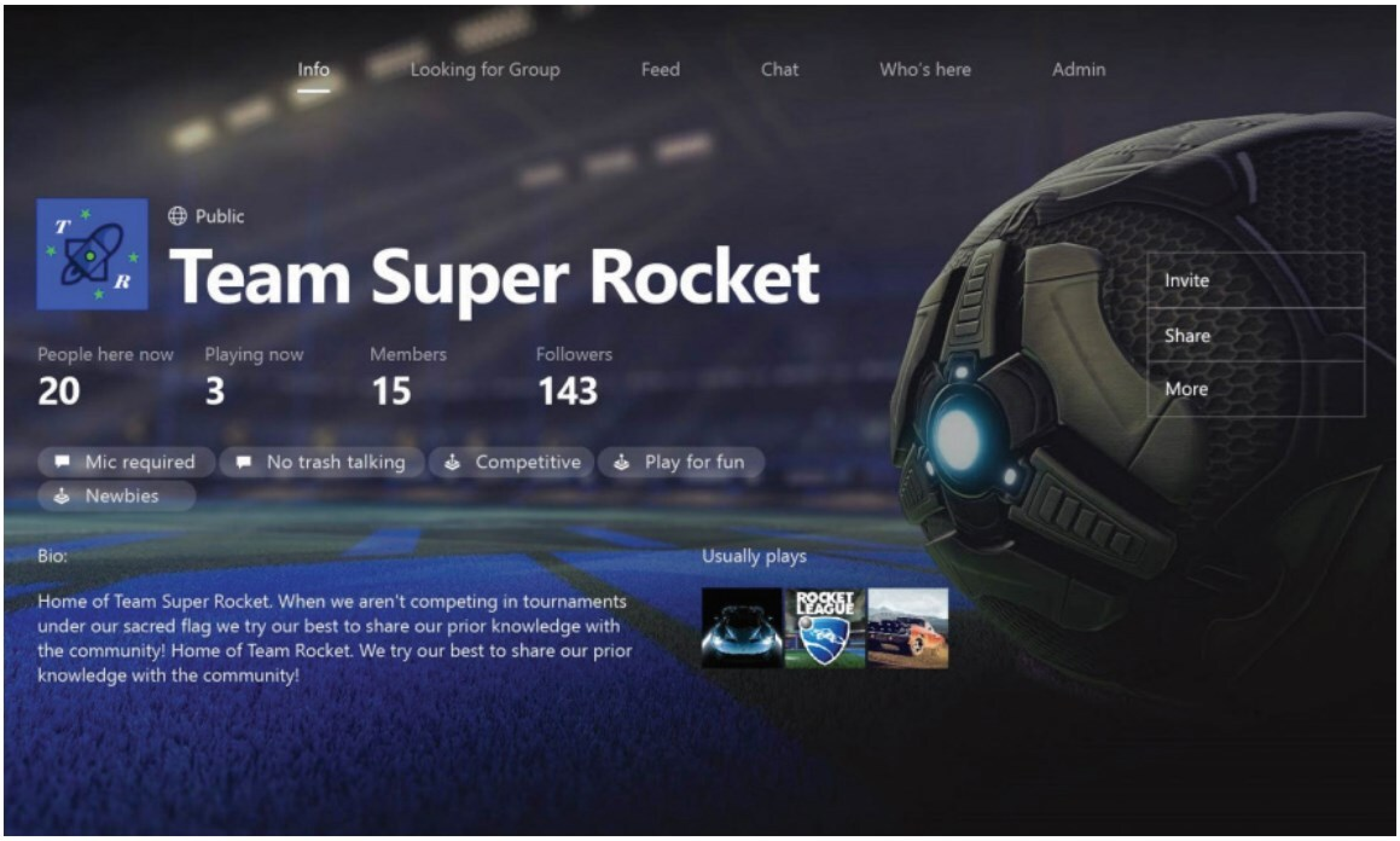
Xbox allows players to search for others with similar goals so they can team up in games

Players often feel more encouraged to report if they know it's facilitating change. Sure, giving players the ability to mute or block players that rub them the wrong way helps, but once the Overwatch team started following up on reports and letting the players know action was taken, they noticed it led to an increase in reporting. "That was important, reaching out and building that trust," Mercer says. "Saying, 'Hey, as a member of the Overwatch community, you are part of the solution to dealing with issues of players acting poorly within a game.'"

While self-moderation has certainly been key to helping get problem players out of games, Microsoft saw an opportunity to take it one step further. For those who just want to play or converse with like-minded individuals, Microsoft created the "clubs" feature (online meeting spaces) on Xbox One, where people with similar values, interests, and goals can come together. McCarthy says Microsoft has seen great success in this area. "We discovered the strong communities are not only ones where you provide kind of a safe space and a set of norms, but they're also the ones where they get some degree of self-governance," he explains.

Microsoft has also used clubs as a testing ground for new moderation features, which McCarthy says are in the works. A long-term goal for Xbox is to give you more choices and tools in how you play. "What I mean is put the dials and sliders ultimately in your hands so that you could decide, 'Hey, I want to filter out stuff that is detected as harassing-type messages,' or I'll be silly, like, 'I want to filter out the word 'peanut butter' and never see the word peanut butter again.' You could customize down to whatever level you felt was appropriate as a user."

Involving the community and putting moderation tools in their hands is a step in the right direction, and it's encouraging to see more companies put forth ways for the community to help. After all, this is too big of an issue to be tackled alone, and it will only grow in complexity as games continue to get bigger and are turning more and more into social activities.



People here now 20
Playing now 3
Members 15
Followers 143

Mic required · No trash talking · Competitive · Play for fun · Newbies

Bio:
Home of Team Super Rocket. When we aren't competing in tournaments under our sacred flag we try our best to share our prior knowledge with the community! Home of Team Rocket. We try our best to share our prior knowledge with the community!

Minecraft, the best-selling game of all time, is available across 20 different platforms, making community moderators and parental controls essential

BUILDING A BETTER FUTURE

The industry doesn't get better if it's not constantly finding new solutions, and many companies are realizing that more needs to be done as our technology grows. "This needs to be a solved problem," Priebe says. "Because games are [becoming] more and more voice-driven, especially as you need collaboration more than ever. People are realizing that if you have social games, that's where your friends are."

While game developers are still behind in this area, there is plenty of hope for the future. "What we are facing in gaming is more of a cultural shift over the last 10 years ... and it is on us to react more quickly than we have in the past to stay ahead of the curve," says Rainbow Six Siege community developer Craig Robinson. "Right now, we are playing catch-up, and that's not where we need to be in order to get toxicity under control. I expect for there to be a ton of improvements over the next 5-10 years across the industry, especially with the various publishers and developers sharing their learnings and insights through the Fair Play Alliance."

And plenty of people tackling this issue have already been thinking ahead. Right now, we've depended largely on reactive measures to moderate people. The problem with that is it's after the fact, as in the damage is already done. Many have an eye toward being more proactive, which means trying to anticipate problems before they happen, whether that's designing to combat them or depending more on filters and A.I. "I think one of the biggest challenges is being stuck in the ways we've done things before," Hart says. "We have the social needs increasing for players online; we need to think of our games differently. We need to be much more proactive. If we wait to have a game to be thinking about how people may interact with each other within that game, we're already behind because then we have to retrofit systems onto an existing game as opposed to proactively designing to reduce disruption and to help produce those successful interactions. A short way of putting it is we need to move from punitive to proactive."

What's encouraging is that technology is only going to get better, and many feel optimistic that A.I. will be a great asset in moderation going forward. "A.I. is something that could really be a difference maker with regards to how we're able to moderate and how we're able to enforce its scale across the community," Tanielian says. Companies like Microsoft have already been investing in this area by trying to get as much data as possible to ensure the A.I. is accurate. "There's actually goodness in those models getting trained more and more by more data," McCarthy says. "As an example, we've done something called 'photo DNA' at Microsoft, where we tag certain images and we actually share that database with a large range of other companies. This is where I think collaboration is actually really important in the industry. Because if we can start to share some of these models and learning, then they get more sophisticated and accurate, and they actually can help a larger range of users overall. That's just something we have to keep chipping away at: How do we utilize powerful technology like that in the right way? And to get it trained broadly across the industry to do the things we want it to do?"

These are big questions, but they're the ones we can't afford to leave unsolved, as we're spending more and more time in these online spaces. ◆

CONTROL

Remedy's Control is a power fantasy. As the new director of the Federal Bureau of Control, players have access to a suite of psychic powers that facilitate some truly incredible firefights against an army of interdimensional aggressors. Control might be one of Remedy's tightest packages to date, so we talked with several members of the team and asked them about Control's strange world, its satisfying combat, and some of the game's biggest technical challenges. *by Ben Reeves*

Control's story is weird and surreal. Was anything deemed too weird or confusing to include?

Mikael Kasurinen – Game Director: A sense of authenticity in the face of the absurd was important to us, and we definitely wanted to avoid pulpy clichés: This is not a world of wizards or werewolves, but about strange and unexpected supernatural phenomena, in a genuine package. I don't think anything was deemed too weird. Everything is valid when you're putting together something new.

What is the hardest part of designing a Metroid-like world?

Kasurinen: The complexity of allowing the players to pursue multiple things at the same time was tough. We had to rethink how we tell stories and how we construct the world around them. There were some real technical challenges that we had to tackle to make it possible: It's simply not something we've done before.

There never was a silver bullet. We had to tackle each case individually and agree on some basic principles in visual storytelling. For instance, doors had to maintain a certain look and should never be arbitrarily locked so you could never open them. In other words, the player should be able to read the environment and draw conclusions that inform their pursuits. A locked door should present the idea of a puzzle, something to overcome, not just a prop that leads nowhere. Establishing that kind of visual agreement with the player was important.

Getting a game out on time and on budget is hard. Did you employ any development tricks or creatively cut any corners to get Control done?

Thomas Puha – Communications Director: When we look at the "vision" document for Control that was made back in early 2016, it is pretty much the game we set out to make, which is rather incredible considering Control only took three years to make. One of the big changes from our past games was that we have a very limited amount of traditional cutscenes in Control, because they are very slow to make and are also some of the most expensive content in a video game. From a design point of view, Control was never going to be a game that had a lot of cutscenes slowing down the action and taking away – ahem – control, from the players. Having a single location also helped us create the environments faster, though having enough variety was a critical concern.

Control's gunplay feels good, but the auto reload takes a while to get used to. How did you land on that mechanic? Did you ever explore a more traditional manual reload/ammo system?

Kasurinen: I have the philosophy that we should minimize the amount of unnecessary decisions – leave things out that do not serve the purpose of fueling your tactics and improvisation. Embrace simplicity and challenge convention. In this case, the scarcity of ammo wasn't a basis for interesting decisions. It's not a survival game where you carefully choose what to use at any given time, but a game where we give the player a reliable palette of fun options.

The decisions are not about your perceived long-term future in the world, but what are the right actions to take in the heat of combat. I don't want players to worry about whether there is a boss fight coming and to save the rockets for that, it's annoying and leads to hoarding. It's not an interesting decision, it's guessing. The players should feel like they can use anything they want and have fun. I know the gun recharge takes a bit of time to get used to, but in the larger scheme of things it makes sense and provides an essential rhythm for the experience pushing the player to use abilities as well.

Jesse's telekinesis is really fun. What is the secret to making that ability so satisfying?
Kasurinen: It is probably one of the most complicated features we've ever built at Remedy. It's a combination of streamlining the design so that it is easy to grasp items, and that the response in the world is visceral and satisfying. To achieve that we had to have tight co-operation between game design, visual effects, sound effects, animation and gameplay coding departments. Also, it directly affected how we built the world, and we had to ensure that every object, every surface in the world responds to physical impacts in the right way. It wasn't easy, but it was definitely worth it.

Did you have any other mental powers that got scrapped during development? What were some of the wildest ideas?
Kasurinen: Early on, we thought about teleportation, but it was challenging to build a cohesive world around that idea in a way that would really allow you to have the right kind of power fantasy and not just make it feel like a gimmick that has limited potential.

What is up with the Janitor?
Kasurinen: He's pretty weird.

Would it be possible to port Control to the Switch?
Puha: Nothing to announce, so we're not saying we are doing it, but anything is possible with enough time and money. They got Doom and Wolfenstein running on the Switch, but then again, those games have huge resources, which we don't. The question is, if porting a game takes x amount of months and costs x, is it worth doing that and in the end, is the Switch audience interested in Control? Obviously, we do want Control out on as many platforms as possible, but we have limited resources.

Control is getting a photo mode after release. Why do you think that photo modes are so popular these days? Are those kinds of modes harder to implement than people think?
Elmeri Raitanen – Lead Visual Effects Artist: I think photo modes are so popular because they give players a chance to be creative in a lot of different ways. You can appreciate the art and visual style of a game and still bring your own individual interpretation of a scene to the table. When it comes to how hard photo modes are to implement, it depends a lot on the game and how it's set up to work. In Control's case, there were a couple of things that we had to think about.

First of all, the exposure of the camera and atmospheric values like fog, bloom and color grading trigger with the location of the playable character, not the position of the in-game camera. In a traditional photomode the camera is flying freely and the playable character can be hidden, so in case there's a huge distance between the playable character and the camera, you might end up looking at an "incorrect final image" and take pictures of that. An example would be a situation where you leave Jesse lurking in a dark and damp corridor and fly out to a big, brightly lit hall – the high-key environment where the camera is would end up being severely overexposed. That's something we had to keep in mind when designing how the free camera in the photo mode will behave.

Additionally, in Control, one of the key visual effects – the Hiss effect that occurs when you kill a Hiss-corrupted enemy – is being rendered with a very specific technique using a fluid simulation and a feedback loop. When sampling visual information from the previous frame and re-projecting it from the camera in the next one, freezing the simulation but still moving the camera will result in some very peculiar artifacts.

Did Max Payne secretly get his bullet-time ability from one of Control's objects of power?
Kasurinen: Oh, well, you said it first. ◆

The Good

Cyberpunk 2077 developer **CD PROJEKT RED** has announced multiplayer plans for the action/RPG. This component of the title will appear after the game releases in April and the free DLC goes out. Unfortunately, the developer hasn't detailed exactly what form the multiplayer will take.

The Bad

Two Kickstarter employees are claiming they were fired without cause for trying to start the **KICKSTARTER UNION**. Kickstarter denies the claims and says it will not fire people for union organizing. Currently a formal charge has been filed with the National Labor Relations Board, and game creators are encouraged to sign a petition against Kickstarter's actions.

KICKSTARTER UNITED
OPEIU 153

The Ugly

2K20
SQUAD
SQUAD

The launch of another **NBA 2K** basketball game is marred by online problems. Apart from the usual bugs and grind/microtransactions of MyCareer mode, gamers also reported their MyPlayers not progressing, and parts of others modes weren't active. The fanbase was further stung by comments from the developer before release that caused them to expect more player build variation, full respec options, and more that wasn't in the game at launch.

Quotable

"... We'd be stupid not to do it, and if anyone from other games or entertainment companies is reading this, you'd be stupid not to do it, too."

Sports Interactive's Miles Jacobson via GamesIndustry.biz. Jacobson and publisher Sega are making the packaging for Football Manager 2020 and beyond plastic free, made from 100 percent recycled materials, and recyclable (sans shrink wrap and disc).

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The Power Of PAX

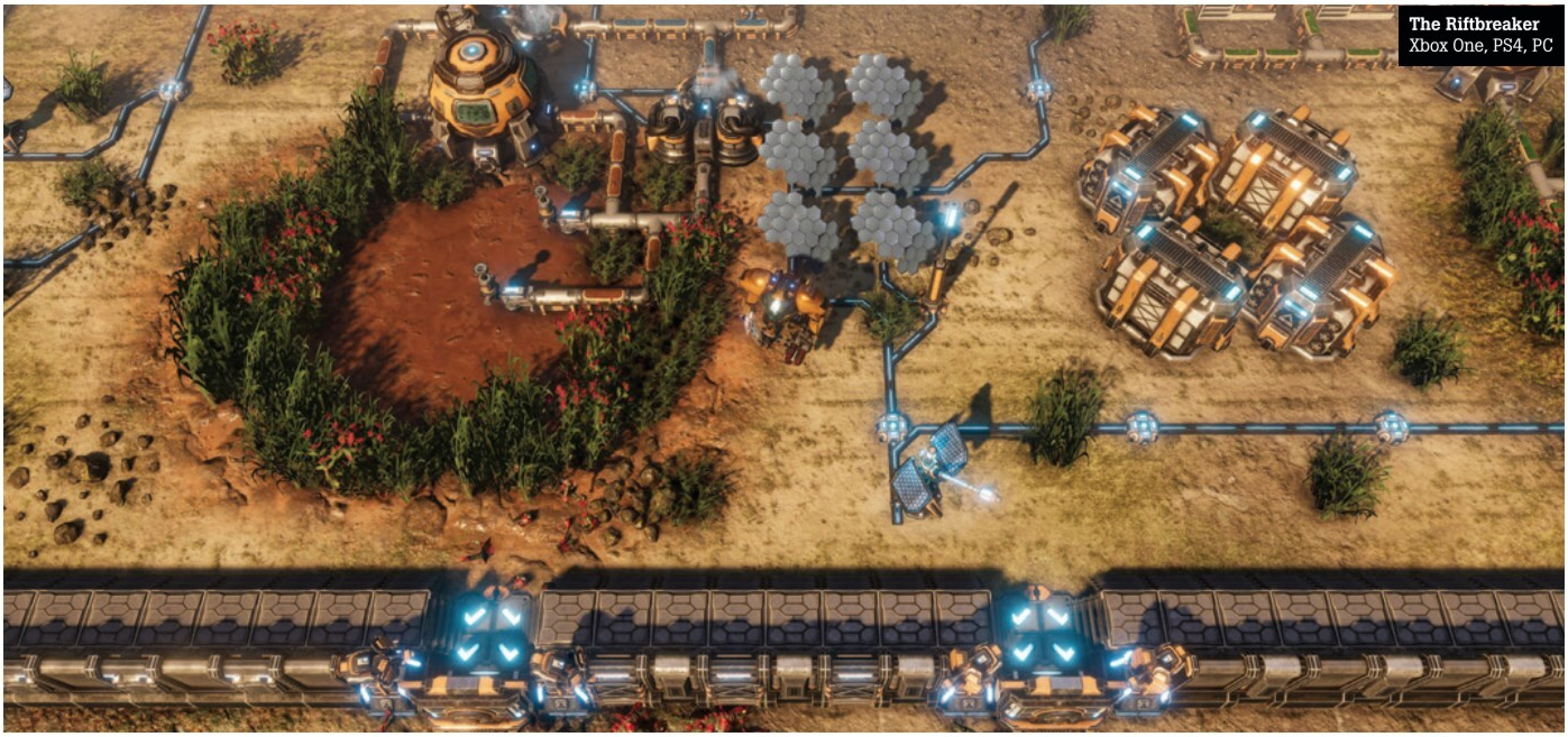
At every Penny Arcade Expo, dozens of amazing indies make their major showings to the world. While it's impossible to cover all of them here, these games stood out in a sea of other extremely promising titles. *by Daniel Tack*

First up is a game that requires absolutely no vision to play. That's right, you play the entire game blind, so to speak – making it one of a mere handful of titles that caters to blind and visually-impaired gamers. **The Vale** (PC) is a story-driven RPG that tasks the player with forgetting everything they know about playing a game with visual assistance and prompts, instead leaning toward sound and haptic feedback. Developed by Falling Squirrel, the team consulted with The Canadian National Institute for the Blind and have created something quite unlike the vast majority of games out there. You're still going to get in battles, gain new abilities, acquire equipment and items, and move the story along – but you're doing so while staring at a mostly black screen. The Vale is scheduled to release sometime early next year.

The indie scene is swamped with roguelike dungeon crawling fare. Remember Peggle? Well if you combined the two genres, you get **Roundguard** (PC). Wonderbelly Games may have struck gold with this curious combination. Combining the pachinko-esque pinball bounces and bloops with all kinds of RPG elements may seem like a strange mix, but it's wondrous alchemy when it comes together. As a warrior, rogue, or wizard, the trek through Castle Springbottom is a tough one. Loot, items, randomized dungeons, quests, special abilities, and all those great things fit into a map where you can select your path and perils as you work toward the big boss.

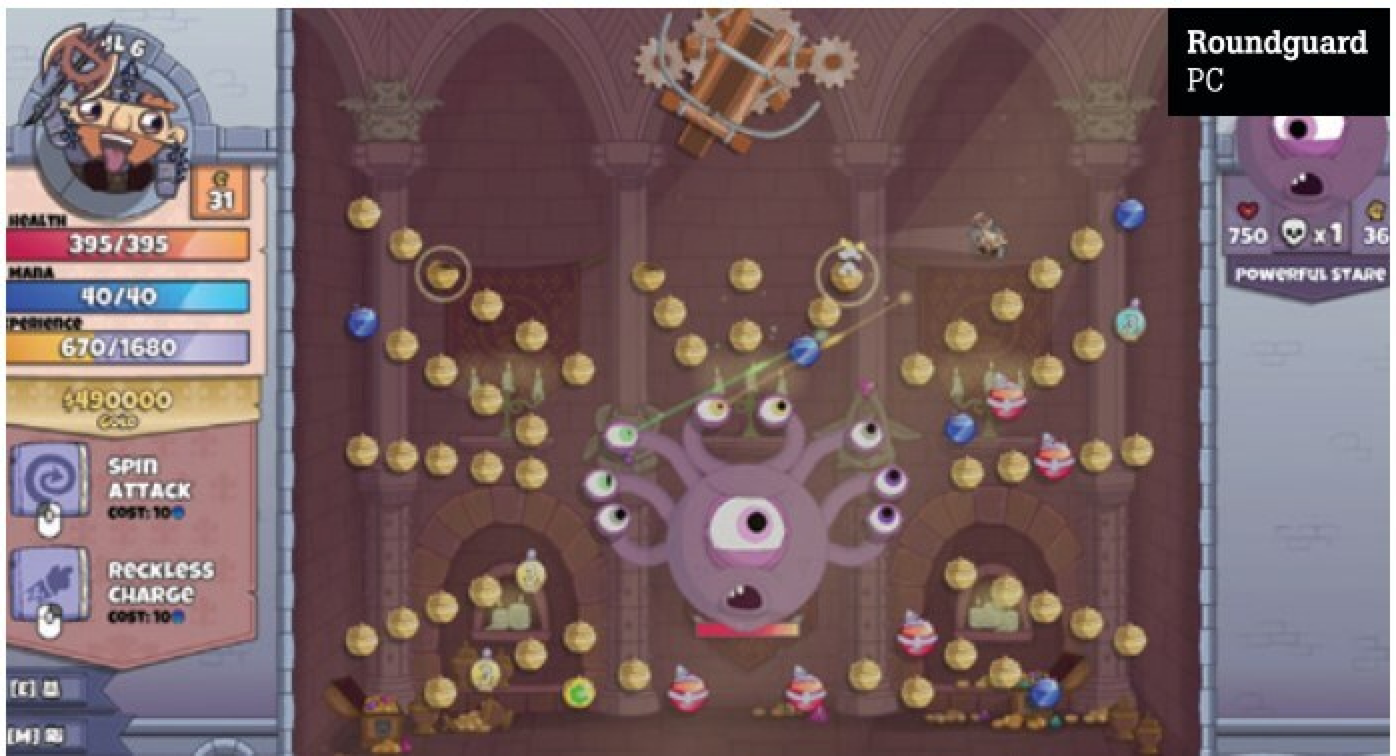
Last but certainly not least is Exor Studio's **The Riftbreaker** (PS4, Xbox One, PS4, PC). It's part real-time strategy base building, part survival, part tower defense, and somehow, part action RPG. As a badass in a mech suit, you leave your base to take on hordes of enemies to gather resources and loot, which you feed back into your base to unlock new research options and more powerful static defenses. Deciding whether you need to be back home helping defend from behind walls or roaming the world in search of rare monsters and upgrades is something that needs to be balanced, or you'll watch your base burn and lose the game. Combat is fast and fluid as you rip through swarms with continually upgraded and customized gear. Pooling all these game types together could feel disjointed, but the final result is something special – and something worth watching as it aims for a 2020 release.

As always, PAX is the best place to find the hottest upcoming indie titles, whatever your platform of choice. I can't wait for these games, and the next show, to once again put standout indie games on the map.



The Riftbreaker
Xbox One, PS4, PC

The Vale
PC



Roundguard
PC

GYM LEADERS

by Brian Shea

Giovanni

(Red/Blue)

As the big boss of the devious Team Rocket, Giovanni faces off with you a couple of times over the course of first-generation games. However, near the end, it's revealed that the Viridian City gym was only vacant earlier because its leader was none other than Giovanni, resulting in a climactic clash.

Blue

(Gold/Silver)

After serving as your obnoxious rival in the Gen I games, Blue returns as the surprise gym leader of Viridian City in Pokémon Gold and Silver. When you combine his known history with the fact that his team doesn't consist of one single Pokémon type, it's a battle to remember.

Clair

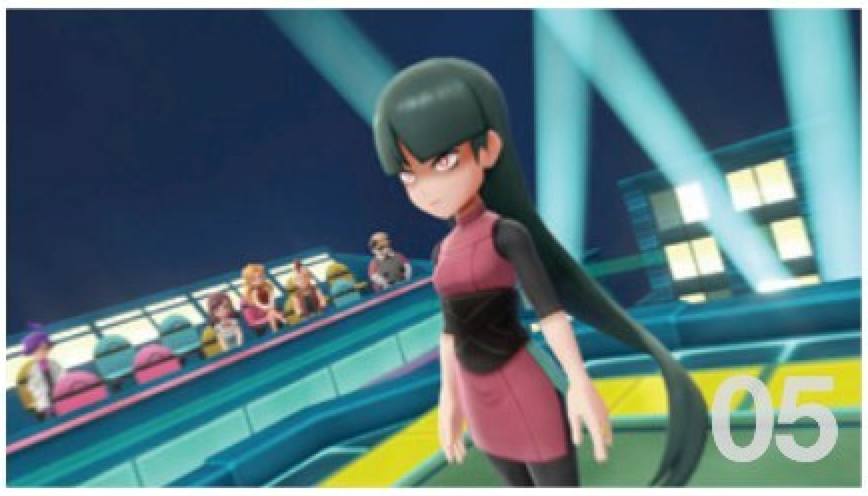
(Gold/Silver)

One of the strongest trainers in the Johto region, Clair and her dragons give you a run for your money late in your Gold or Silver adventure. Confident to the point of rejecting defeat at the hands of the player, Clair is also one of the stronger personalities of the gym leaders.

Volkner

(Diamond/Pearl)

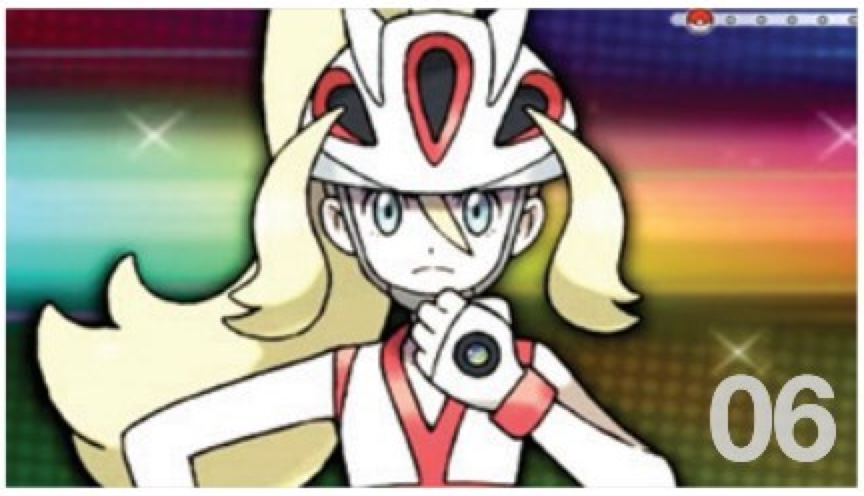
As a top gym leader in Sinnoh, electric-type specialist Volkner finds himself bored by the lack of worthy challengers. However, after falling at the hands of the player, Volkner is reminded why he loves what he does, providing a compelling and relatable arc.



Sabrina

(Red/Blue)

Though the gym design in Saffron is annoying, psychic-type gym leader Sabrina is one of the coolest leaders in any of the games. Possessing psychic abilities herself, she communicates with her Pokémon telepathically. Oh, and she can bend spoons with her mind.



Korrina

(X/Y)

A social-media star thanks to PR Videos, Korrina is well-liked in the Kalos region. However, her fame isn't unearned, as she's also closely tied to the Mega Evolution phenomenon of the region, even helping the player learn how to harness the power in battle.

So be it!
Show me your best!

Brock

(Red/Blue)

In addition to being the first gym leader in the series, Brock also serves as a good litmus test to how your journey is going early on. If you chose Squirtle or Bulbasaur, you likely breezed through his Geodude and Onix, but that doesn't make this premier encounter any less memorable.

My policy for battle is...

Misty

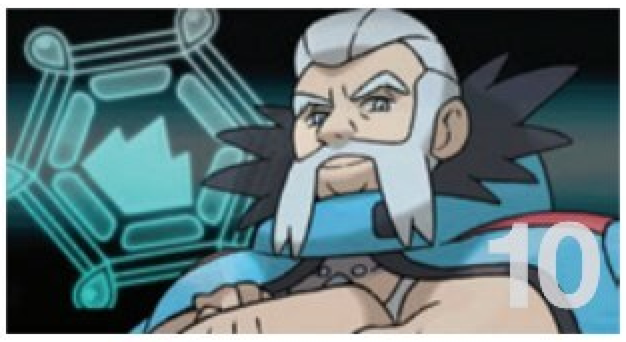
(Red/Blue)

One of the most popular characters in the entire series thanks to her run on the anime, Misty's role as the step up in competition after Brock should not be understated. She also returns as a gym leader in Gold and Silver as the player journeys through Kanto once more.

Maylene

(Diamond/Pearl)

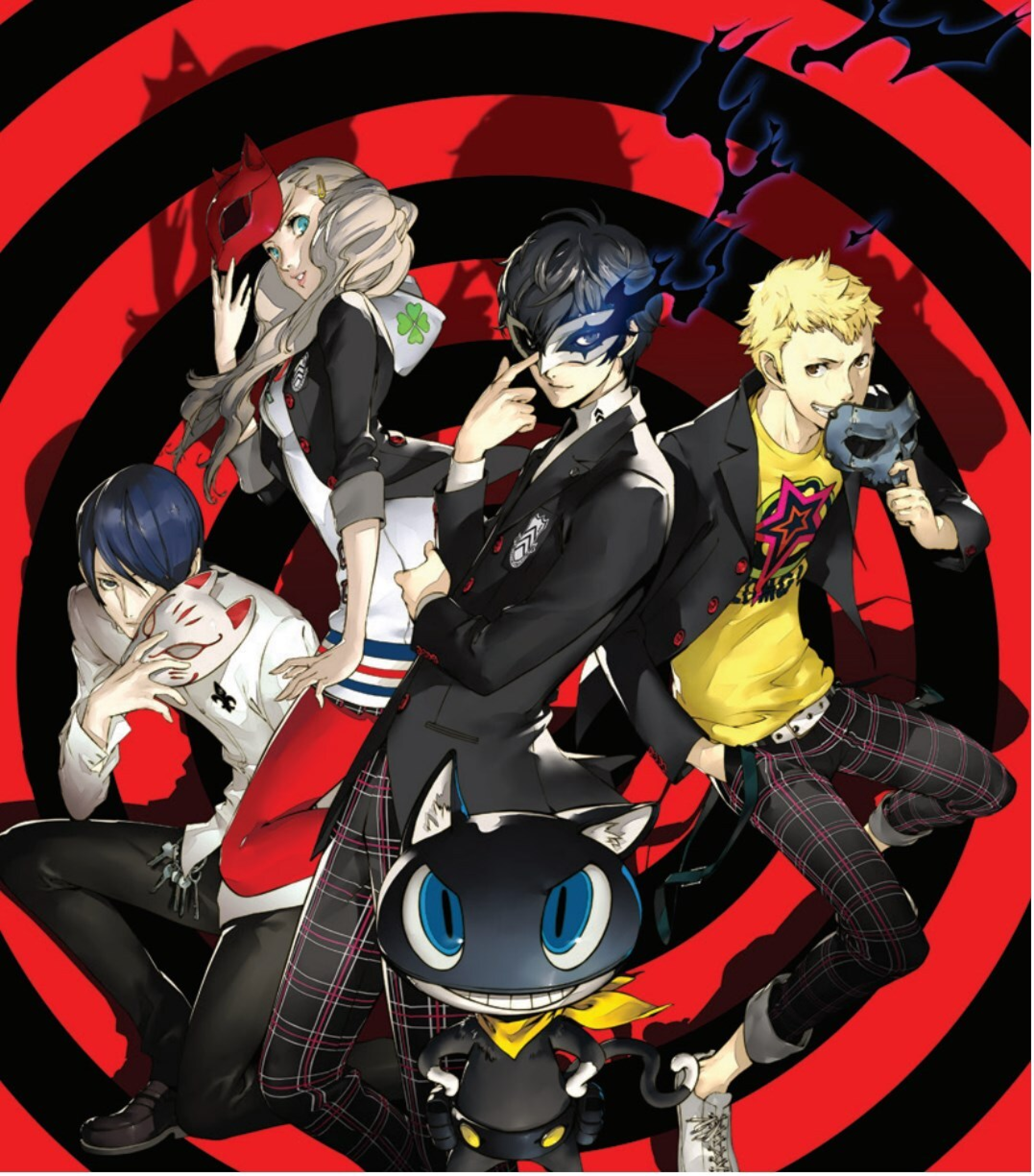
The tough-as-nails fighting-type trainer Maylene may look like a typical little girl, but get on her bad side and you'll understand why Veilstone City residents respect her power. Battle her and her strong lineup of fighting-type monsters and you'll likely join them in that regard.



Wulfric

(X/Y)

In addition to being a strong gym leader with an icy lineup of Abomasnow, Cryogonal, and Avalugg, Wulfric is admired by trainers and Pokémon alike for how kind he is to the creatures that inhabit the Kalos region. Also, just look at the dude; he's clearly incredible. ◆



The Artistic Visionary Behind Persona And Catherine

Meet the man responsible for the designs of Atlus' most stylish franchises

If there's one word that's associated with the Persona series, it's stylish. An integral part of that is thanks to character designer Shigenori Soejima. Soejima has been working on the franchise since its inception, but he made the leap to art director starting with Persona 3. Chances are his designs have caught your eye in some way, such as the iconic Persona 3 image with the main character holding a gun (evoker) to his head. Soejima's mature and distinct art style has been used to showcase the fight against corruption with the Phantom Thieves in Persona 5 and capture the overt sexuality of a love triangle gone terribly wrong in Catherine. Both have new ways to play them thanks to re-releases with new content (Catherine: Full Body available now, Persona 5 Royal in March 2020). Last month, Atlus celebrated big with an art exhibit devoted to Soejima's designs at Gallery Nucleus in Alhambra, Calif. At the showcase, we caught up with Soejima for an interview, where he reflected on his career and teased more about future projects. ***interview by Kimberley Wallace***

How is it different designing for a series like Persona versus Catherine?
I really feel like they're completely different approaches to design, especially because after we worked on Persona 4, the director and producer [Katsura] Hashino had said, "Let's try something completely different." Catherine was sort of a challenge to myself to try to switch gears completely and create something new. The first main difference is obviously Catherine's a lot more sensual and sexual, and so that design was definitely a departure from the Persona series. Also for Persona, I have been depicting and designing characters who are in the Japanese high-school setting. To depart from that and sort of go into a world where it's not Japan, it's not any specific country, that was a whole new experience for myself and it kind of freed me in a way to design something completely different. It's almost like someone who had just been doing Japanese high-school designs was suddenly able to design for Dragon Ball.

How much information, such as personality traits, do you have to go off of before you start designing characters?
There are definitely characters where there are already certain specific characteristics that I need to design for, and that's true more for the side characters. But for the main characters, in the case of Persona 5 for the Phantom Thieves, I actually started developing the visuals right when the director was saying that, "I'd like this story to center on these kids that are thieves." That was pretty much all the information that I had to go off of to start designing, and so the visuals kind of came first. Then I would talk amongst the writer, the director, and the designer to come up with a cool visual that makes sense for what is catchy for this type of group, and kind of mold the personality and character together.

For Persona 5 Royal, how was it coming back and designing characters after being away from it for a while? How did you ensure the characters were different enough but still fit in the game?
It was definitely a challenge. It's always a challenge to actually bring in new elements to something that's already loved by fans. With Persona R, there's a new character [Kasumi] that's custom made. We are aware that bringing a new character into an existing storyline, they're not at the same starting line as other characters in terms of familiarity to the fans and how they'll be received. So, we're all kind of nervous about how new characters are seen. With Kasumi in particular, we wanted someone outside of the Phantom Thieves, [who is] viewing the situation from a whole different perspective. We also [wanted to] bring her close in standing to one of the main characters, kind of in the protagonist way, where fans will be able to see the story from a brand-new perspective and [have] a new character.

How did you come up with Kasumi's design?
With Kasumi, I really wanted to create just a straight-forward heroine type of character. This might be a little bit different in the West, but in Japan, the manga I grew up reading, the main [female] characters always had a ponytail, and their club activity was gymnastics. I really wanted to just shoot for that female protagonist archetype. Maybe in the States or in the West, it'd be [comparable to] a cheerleader type of girl. With most of the characters in Persona 5, we really design them to have kind of a twist, kind of make them unique and different from what the standard character archetypes might be like, but with Kasumi, we wanted to just go straight for that heroine type of girl.

We recently saw Jose for the first time and his design is very different than anything else that we've seen before. How did you come up with that design?
I think you'll understand the reasoning behind the design once you play. [Jose] doesn't really look human...

From dancing to fighting games, we've had a lot of Persona spin-offs. How do you decide what to change up to give the characters a new look?
With the spin-offs, we know that we're using characters that fans already know very well, and so the intention a lot of times is to show a new side to the character. Or we like to kind of imagine alongside with the fans, like, "If this character were to start dancing, what kind of moves would they do?" We try to really think about the personality of the characters, things we haven't shown previously that might be true to the character and bring that into the design.

What's your favorite project or character that you've worked on?
As far as games that I've worked on, each game has a special place in my heart because there was a lot of work that went into each one. There are different challenges. But for characters, for Persona 3, Aigis is one of my favorites. For Persona 4, it's Chie, and then for Persona 5, it's the protagonist. I think the reason why I love these characters so much is because I put things that I really love into the design and they resonated with fans, so they liked it too. That kind of resonance is really what leads me to decide on a favorite character. A lot of times I put things I like into a character, but it doesn't quite translate to fans, or something resonates with fans that I didn't expect at all. When it matches up where I liked it and they liked it, [those characters tend to be my favorite].

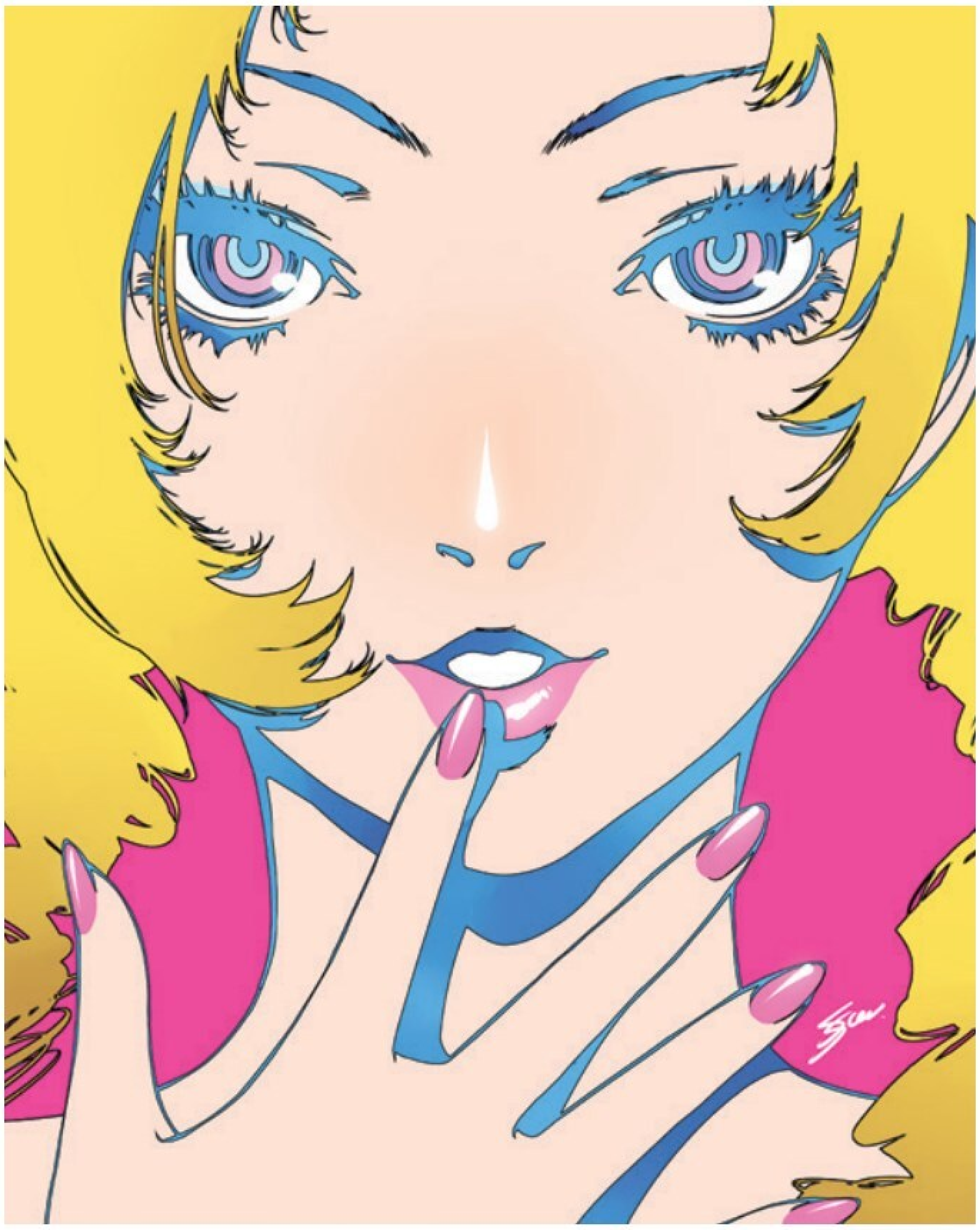
What's been the most challenging design for you?
The most difficult character has to be Catherine. When they first approached me to design her, I really thought they were pulling my leg. And the director, [Katsura] Hashino, knows I like to draw characters and design them in a stylish sort of way, so I know that he just wanted me to do something I had never really done before.

You've been working on Persona for a while now. What has kept you interested in the series and where would you like to see it go next?
As to why I've been continuing to work on the Persona series, there's just always new things that I want to try. There are always things I want to do better with each game, but there's also some new challenges or aspects that I want to try out. I think that's the driving force that keeps me working on the Persona series. As for the future of the series, I know now that it's become more well-known in the West and there are a lot more fans and eyes looking at the series. Of course [fans] have loved the series up to this point, but I'm sure with more eyes on it, there's going to be different things that the fans are looking for in the game. I hope that we can continue to have that conversation with fans and bring them something that they really enjoy.

You're working on the upcoming game Project Re Fantasy. What can we expect from your designs there?
This is completely different from what I've worked on [previously]. I've always loved fantasy, but once I started working on it, it became, "Well, what exactly is fantasy and how can we bring a meaningful fantasy game into this world? What can we bring to this sort of genre and game?" And so there's a lot of trial and error and thinking about this whole genre and how to [create] the design. I feel like we are finally at a place where we have a direction and are moving forward with it. Hopefully, we'll have something to show everyone in the not so distant future. We're creating something only we can bring to the table – a very unique design. [It's] something for fans to look forward to.

Everyone always comments on how stylish the series is. What's your secret to making something that makes that impression on people?
We hear that too. It's amazing that so many people think it's so stylish. When I look back at like maybe Persona 3, I don't feel that it is that stylish. We did introduce some graphic elements into it, but it's not at that stylish level that we feel like everyone is talking about. After that, working on Persona 4 and 5, there was more of a time gap between those titles, and just hearing everyone saying that it's so stylish, kind of put pressure on the team. I think just continuing to hear the voice of fans and that feedback, and then the team responding to that and trying to just do our best and one-up that stylishness is what has made the Persona series what it is today.

That's definitely the reason why I feel Persona 5 has evolved to that level of style. But also, just on the teams, we always felt we don't want it to look like a typical game. We saw, for example, when Apple was showcasing their products, there would be really cool commercials. It wasn't just about their product, and they were going beyond the boundaries and reaching out to more audiences. That's what we kind of wanted to do with our games. Games can be appreciated by more than just people who are already into games. There are more people that could see how fun these are. That was kind of our mentality when designing everything, and I think that kind of led to the look of the Persona series as well. ◆



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Going The Distance

At the 2019 Pokémon World Championships, Kieng Iv (PogoKieng) was eager to prove that competitive Pokémon Go deserved a spotlight

Despite being a global juggernaut, Pokémon Go felt like the underdog at this year's Pokémon World Championships in Washington, D.C. The mobile game's PvP mode joined the ranks of Pokémon Ultra Sun and Moon, Pokkén, and the Pokémon Trading Card Game on the main stage and surprised attendees and viewers with its viability on the competitive scene. Flying from Toronto, Pokémon Go champion Kieng Iv used his team of Deoxys, Azumarill, Tropius, Swampert, Umbreon, and his "MVP" Skarmory to defeat his competition that included Game Freak producer Junichi Masuda and designer Shigeki Morimoto.

interview by Ben Hanson

How long have you known that competitive Pokémon Go would be at the Pokémon World Championships, and how long have you been training for this moment?
To be honest, before Pokémon Go PvP came out, I wasn't sure I was actually going to be doing that much PvP because I'm not really that competitive of a person. I'm more of a community type individual, but I found it really enjoyable. They told me about the Invitational a while ago and made me sign an NDA. It was really tough not to tell anybody. [Everybody was] really excited to see it on the main stage, and I think the viewership numbers proved that there's a really dedicated community and an audience that will continue to grow.

How does the mood and style of competitive Pokémon Go compare to the video game and card game?
It's slightly less complex in terms of the number of variables in actual PvP, but the pace and the strategy is very different. Pokémon Go PvP is much faster paced, so you don't have time to think because each movement is about one second. So wasting two or three seconds thinking about something might cost you the entire match.

Do you remember where you caught each of your Pokémon?
Tropius, which I hid until the finals, I actually got when I went to Japan Safari Zone. So it has a really close and dear memory to me. I know every single one, and some of them I obtained through trades and through friends that I've met through this game.

Are you just dominating every gym around where you live?
No no, I'm actually very much about community. I don't want to be the best Pokémon Go PvP player in the world, I want to be the best PvP coach in the world.

So you want to be the very best … coach?
Absolutely. I'm a teacher by heart and teacher by profession.

Okay, so what your three biggest tips for people playing competitive Pokémon Go?
One, I think, is to be humble. No matter if you're at the top of your game or just starting out, being very humble on how you can get better with new strategies and tactics. The second tip I have is go and seek resources. So there's a lot of great websites like pvpoke.com and a lot of great Discords like GO Stadium. And I think the third most important thing is go out there and compete against other people and have fun with it. There's a lot of grassroots tournaments that you can just search for and there's a lot of great resources available to help you go practice in your local community.

Do you want to talk about going up against Game Freak in the tournament? What was it like to have Pokémon's developers on stage?
When I saw that the game developers were on stage, I thought about what a great honor it is to be on stage with them or even be in the same room with them! Actually seeing them backstage watching other people battle really intensely and then try to implement those strategies in real time with their next battle was amazing.

Did those strategies help at all? It looks like they got crushed out there.
Yeah, well to be fair Morimoto actually put up a good fight. To be honest, if he had slightly better Pokémon then he could have won his first round. Masuda-san had a little bit more fun with it. [His] maxed-out Psyduck was really cool. ◈

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STREETS

interview

A Knight In Shining Armor

Swen Vincke wasn’t always on top. From basic beginnings and a scrappy, dark path through the often tumultuous games industry, the founder of Larian Studios has gone from sneaking into trade shows to helming one of the most anticipated RPGs of all time with Baldur’s Gate 3. We spoke with Vincke about Larian’s tough climb to greatness.

interview by Daniel Tack

Let’s begin at the beginning. How did you get into video games?
I got sick. I was also very active. I like basketball. It was at my communion. So, there was a big party, I went to the communion, and lo and behold, together with my cousin, I went and drank all the sips of champagne that the adults have at those. Guess who fell down with the kissing disease a couple of days later? I had a really bad case of mononucleosis, so I was stuck at home.

Somebody took pity on me and gave me his ZX81, which was a 1K computer. I was bored like hell and I was also sick like hell. I picked up … there was a yellow book – I will never forget it – which was Basic, how to program. Since I went to the arcades, I said, “Well, why don’t I make a game in this Basic thing? Let’s see if I can do that.” And so I made my first game.

What was it?
My father was a big-game hunter. I was trying to make a hunting simulator, because he was never home. I wanted to make a game about hunting for him. That was my very first thing, and the second game was a skiing game, because that was easy to do. I then went to the Commodore 64, then Amiga, then PC. I studied programming. I don’t know if you remember a game called Empire. It’s like the granddaddy of turn-based strategy games, and you basically had cities. You could earn resources and create units, and it was randomly generated.

Okay, what happened next?
I traveled to ECTS, which was like a European version of E3. This was in the ’90s, beginning of the ’90s. I bluffed myself in because it was an industry-only event. I had my copies with me and I got an appointment with Atari, which was back then making the Jaguar. They were getting into PC games also. I talked to them. When I walked out of there, I was so nervous, I vomited, but I had the promise of a contract.

A contract right out of the gates?
That contract fell through, and then came a very tough period, where we basically tried to negotiate with all kinds of American publishers and essentially abuse people’s phone lines, because ours had been cut off because we didn’t have any money. We talked to New World Computing, 3DO. We had this little RPG that we were making. At some point, we realized that we have to get some pedigree because nobody took us seriously. We said, “Well, why don’t we make a very small RTS?” This was a time when everybody was making RTS. Yeah, which was easy. “We’ll work on the RTS in the evening and work on the RPG during the day.” We were too ambitious, but we made the RTS. That’s how we actually started in ’96, ’97.

And then?
We had the RPG. It’s a formula which is going to sound very familiar to you. You have a party of different characters that you can disconnect from each other, you can play multiplayer, you can go wherever you want in the world – Ultima V mixed with real-time combat. That became very popular. Well, a lot of things went back to Atari back then, especially if you were in Europe. They saw the game was in development. I mean – I’m not gonna say it was doing fantastic in development. They went to E3, I think it was ’98, and came back and said we have to redo everything. I said, “Why do we have to redo everything?” And they said, “Well, we saw Diablo. We would like to put the story in another universe.”

We started doing it, and they sent their developers to us to help us with the production values. What we didn’t realize is that all the games that they had released were flopping; there was no more money coming into the other side. They said, “Well, we don’t have any money to pay you.” Eventually we got rid of them, and we rebranded [the game]. This is how the first Divinity got born. We signed with another German publisher called CDV, which said the name of the game was Divine Divinity, but I thought they were joking. I thought it was a typo, but I didn’t want to change anything anymore. The marketing departments said this was because alliteration sells well and they had just made a game Sudden Strike. I said, “You’ve gotta be kidding.” But they were not kidding.

I always wondered how it got that name.
Then came the good times. We had money and a publisher that believed in us. We got a new office, everybody was getting paid, the debts were being paid. This was ’99, and the game was supposed to ship in 2001. Suddenly a producer shows up, and says, “I’m here to see if we’re going to cancel the game.” We were far from ready, and I wrote a letter detailing why it was a bad idea to release the game now – it needed six more months, yet it released without us even knowing. I found out about it on a press tour.

We had a really hard time. We were at 30 people, and we had to drop to three people. My nights and days were basically heating up the office and fixing peoples’ save games. It was a horrible time. At the end of 2002 I wanted to quit because I didn’t know what to do anymore. Eventually a bunch of the team got back together, we were 10-11 people and started making Beyond Divinity, with the intent to distribute ourselves. We brought it to market – it was not our best game – but it brought in money.

How were you even surviving at this point?
Work-for-hire allowed us to survive to the point to look for a publishing deal, but we hated it. We really didn’t like it because we were making really stupid things. Such as these things go, it’s a vicious spiral. We started doing work-for-hire again, and we were lucky. We convinced a major broadcaster in Belgium to give us a lot of money for what the broadcaster

Beyond Divinity

thought was going to be a website, but was actually going to be an online game for kids. It had a unique format, sort of like an American Idol for kids. Kids could make movies, animations, cartoons, and dances in the 3D world, send it to the broadcaster, and then the broadcaster showed it on TV. It was innovative back in the day, and we won awards for it, sold it to the BBC, and sold it to several other broadcasters.

We said, "Why don't we do a big RPG, but this time we fund it ourselves or as much as we can so that we retain control of the IP?" We didn't have enough money to do all of it. We needed a publisher. We entered into what is known as a cool publishing deal, except I was still naïve back then. We tried to make a game about a dragon that could fly anywhere and land anywhere. We struggled through that and we found another publisher to help us publish this game. We signed it in 2007. It was supposed to come out in 2008. And then the [financial] crisis hits. This publisher suddenly found itself in incredible financial stress, because they had to make all of their money with games like My Little Pony. All that stuff didn't sell so they were taking tremendous financial hits. They did what a publisher does in those circumstances; they release a game too early. When [Divinity II: Ego Draconis] came to market it wasn't ready. It got s--- reviews. Almost killed us. Really dark period for the studio.

Coming off of that dark period, how did you regroup?
I asked myself, "What's the stuff that we're doing wrong? What is the stuff that we're doing right?" We need to be in control of ourselves, we don't work with other people because we iterate too much. We want to change it because we like what we're playing. If it doesn't feel right, we change it. It's why we're always late with everything we do – that was not the norm back then. Back then when you go to a game convention, it was all about how to better project manage. How to have the right production planning and stuff like that. How to check your boxes. The only words that were not mentioned in all those talks were the games! That just did not work, because we did it out of passion.

Well this is the part where the story becomes good. We said, "We're going to take everything in our own hands; we're going to make our own engine, and then make sure that we have our own publishing team, and we do everything ourselves." That was the thing that we needed to do. Out of Divinity: Original Sin came Divinity: Original Sin II, and out of that came Baldur's Gate 3. All with our own tech, our own team, publishing ourselves, putting us back in touch with our community, which we had lost with all those publishers. It allowed us to do what we wanted. We literally talk to the players on what they think sucks. [They] help us fix it. And this was a step that no publisher wanted to make.

So how did Baldur's Gate happen out of this?
I wanted to license an RPG system, preferably D&D, preferably Baldur's Gate. I got in touch with them through somebody I knew from the industry. They put me in touch with Nate Stewart, who was the head of D&D, and so I got kind of an exam. Like, "What will you do with it?"

I was like, "I'm the perfect guy to make it." And [then there was] nothing. But we kept bumping into each other at every trade show.

Eventually he calls me and says, "Do you still want to do this?" And I said, "Yes!" He invited me to downtown Seattle and in a shady bar he presented to me the full map for Baldur's Gate 3. It was pretty much everything we had talked about. A couple of weeks later he called me and they said yes. So we needed to present them with a design document as we were making Divinity: Original Sin II.

This whole tale is fascinating. It's like a fairy tale story of a game studio.
It wasn't a fairy tale when you were in it. I can tell you that. [laughs]

What was the biggest challenge in going your own way with Divinity: Original Sin?
It's a mundane answer, but the money. I mean, it's the fuel that drives development. The challenge for me personally, I'm a creative guy, is without the money you can't do anything. Balancing your time against finding money to make your games, convincing people and then afterwards doing your thing and trying to keep them away so that they leave you alone to make your thing.

That takes all the time and effort. It's negative energy. I don't know how to make a game other than iterating. I just don't know. I think you have to make it multiple times before you can actually figure out what the game is. Only then can you actually make it good. That doesn't fit with an accountant out there. People still compare making games to making a house, but that's a ridiculous comparison. It doesn't work, and that's always been the challenge. Now we're super lucky because ever since Original Sin, we're free. So we can do whatever we want. It creates a whole bunch of other problems, but none as big as the ones we had before.

So what was one of the biggest changes you made to Divinity: Original Sin during production?
It used to be a real-time game. We made it turn-based. I see that Yakuza has been taking from our book. [laughs]

I asked myself, "What are we doing? We're making a real-time game because they told us." Publishers told us that there's no way you're going to get your distribution deals if it's turn-based. It needs to be real-time, blah, blah, blah. We've been conditioned into thinking real-time. I was in the shower, I was like, "What are we doing? We're gonna be competing with Blizzard making an action RPG? We can't compete with Blizzard, we don't have the resources. But no one is making turn-based RPGs anymore. So maybe that's where we should be going." And that was a really good move.

Did you ever think you wanted to do something other than make games?
Actually, yes. Originally, I wanted to do artificial intelligence, I actually spent quite some time working on voice recognition. That was my original passion. But the video games that I made for my friends, I took so much joy from seeing them have fun with it. To this day, this is why I love PAX. I love sitting at the booth and seeing people play my games. I tend to only look at the negatives of the things that are not working, but I take a lot of joy from them playing.

For Baldur's Gate 3, how do you encapsulate the entire Dungeons & Dragons system in a video game? Where do you even begin?
It's really how do we capture the books, the rule system, the feeling you have at the table in a video game, and how do we do that without alienating people that have never played D&D in their lives. Mixing that, I think we found it. You guys will have to judge. You can't make a game without taking creative risks. You can, but then you're just making the same game. We've taken a lot of creative risks, more than people will expect, I think, considering the amount of money we're throwing at it.

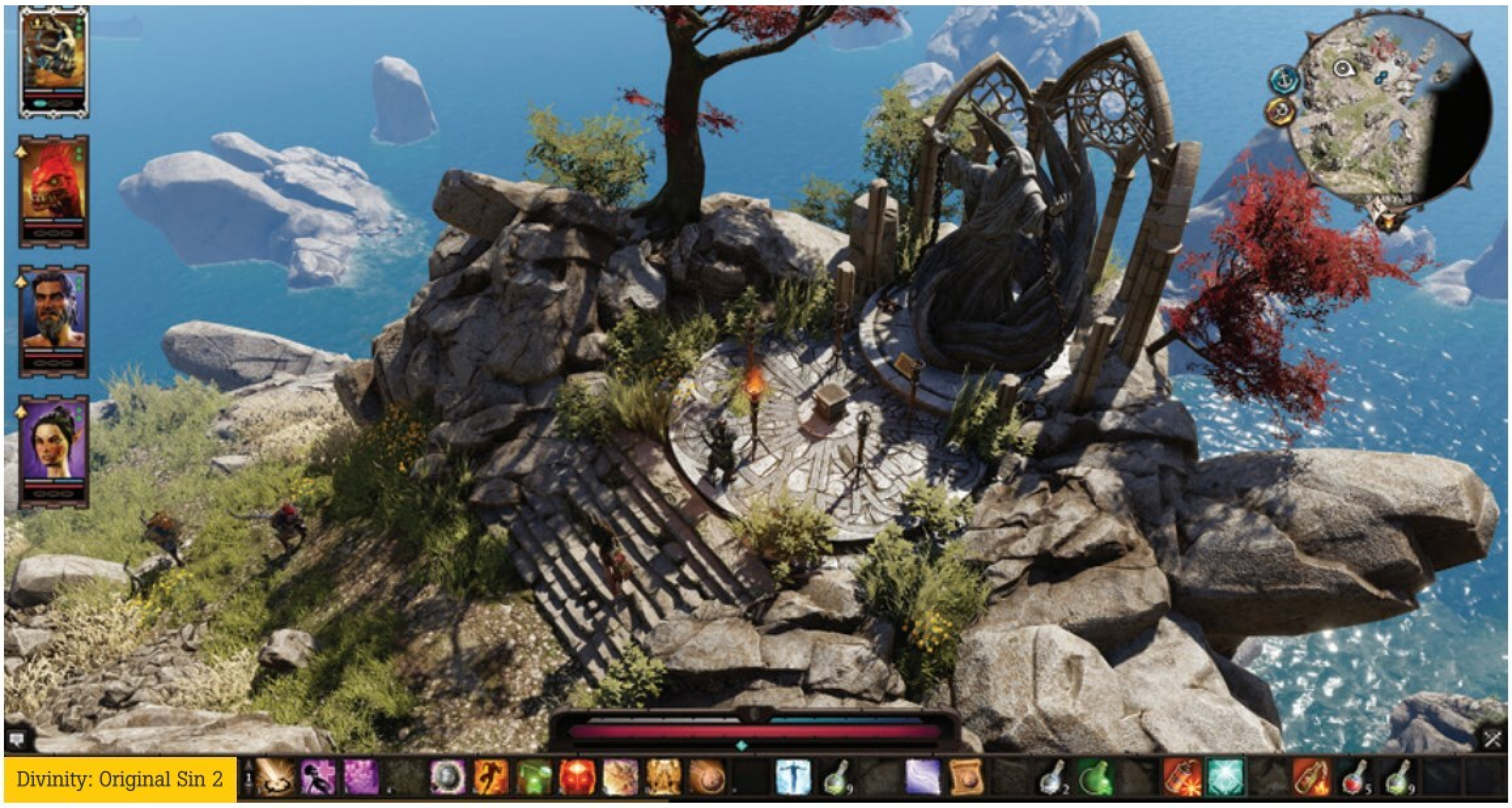
For instance, in Divinity: Original Sin II, you can do almost anything. How do you build a ruleset that can handle all that?
We try to be very consistent about it. "Systemic" is the in-house word. If it's not systemic, it doesn't go in. Basically, we learned this over time, one of the errors that we made in our early games was we were so focused on getting the money that we were puting the systems in there as gimmicks so that we were going to convince people to put money into the games, right? We learned that if you put something in a game, it has to be consistent throughout the game, something that you can always use. If you can't, you shouldn't put it in there. We've gotten better at it over time because one of the criticisms was always [that] we were very ambitious, but [the games were] badly executed. What people start discovering in D:OS, we just make those systems work always. Whenever we put in a new system it has to work with the existing systems, and if you make those complete, you get stuff like this. That's where the beauty comes from.

One of the developers came to me and was like, "I'm playing with my buddy, and I'm doing the exact opposite of everything he wants to do." He said, like, "[The other player] is gonna ruin the game." I told him, "Don't worry about it. This game has got you covered."

So why multiplayer?
Where I was born, nobody had a computer. Nobody played D&D, but this was one thing that interested me. My first fantasy books were D&D, Dragonlance, after The Lord of the Rings. They were hidden in an obscure corner in the library. Nobody was really into it, not as much as you guys have over here. I always wanted to play pen and paper. I always wanted to play D&D. When I discovered RPGs, I said, "Well, this is how you should be playing those things, but at a computer and you can play with other people elsewhere."

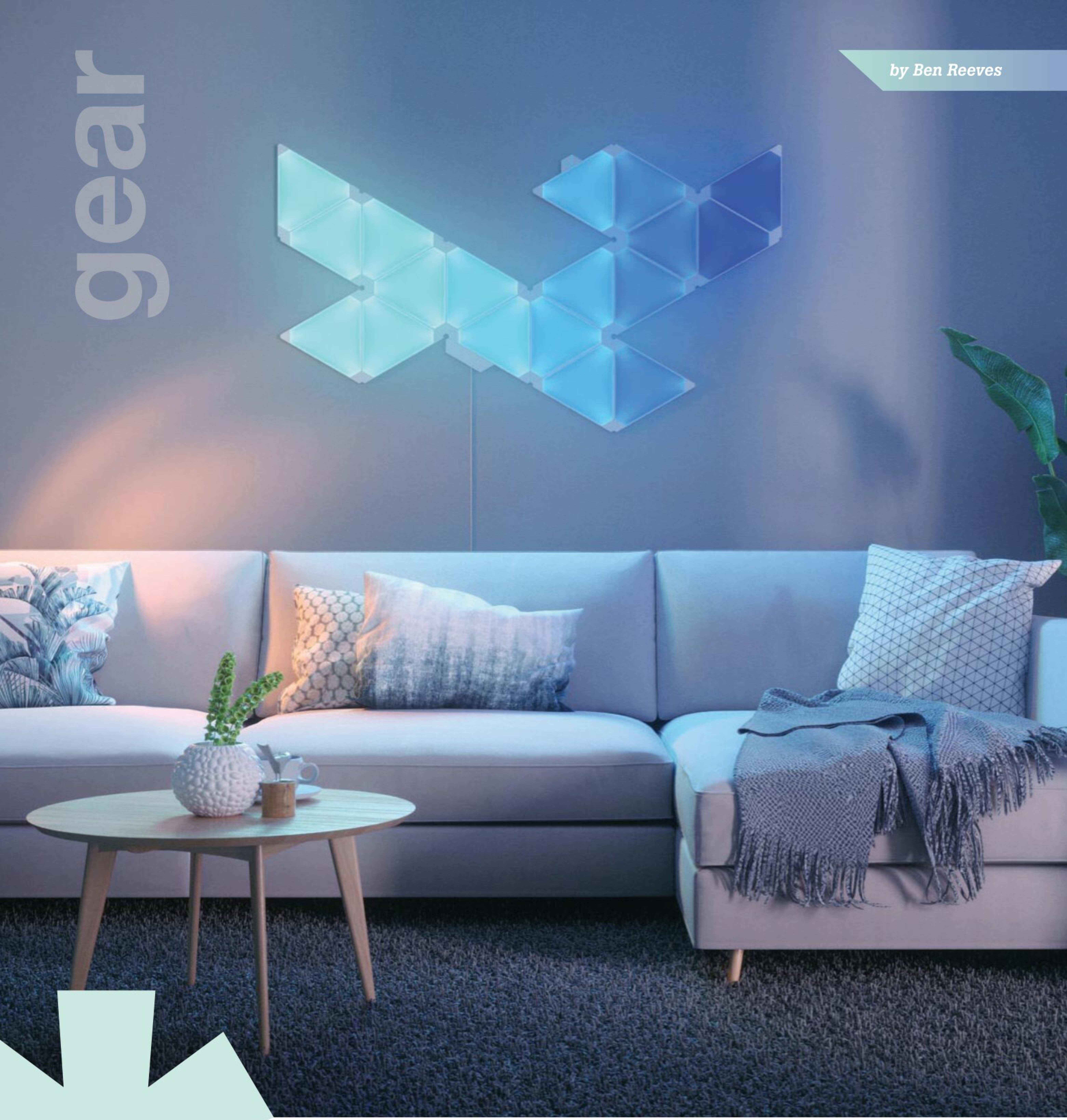
Being able to play with your friends has always been a big thing. Pretty much all my early experiments were split screen. The strategy games I made were turn-based that you played with different people. I didn't have an A.I. actually. It was very natural to do it like this, and to be able to do it online.

So why did you remake the final act of Divinity: Original Sin II?
Because that was the main criticism. It's become part of the DNA of the studio. We are so engaged with the community from Early Access already, it's natural to continue doing it. We look at what players like and what they don't like. We look at where they're blocked, and then we try to fix it. It's just part of making it. The idea behind that is like, "Sorry for you, maybe you didn't have the best experience, but I hope you had a lot of fun." Maybe the next person doesn't necessarily have to have the same experience that you had, we can still fix this, especially with how much love the game was getting and how much money it was making, it felt wrong to leave it like that.



Divinity: Original Sin 2

by Ben Reeves



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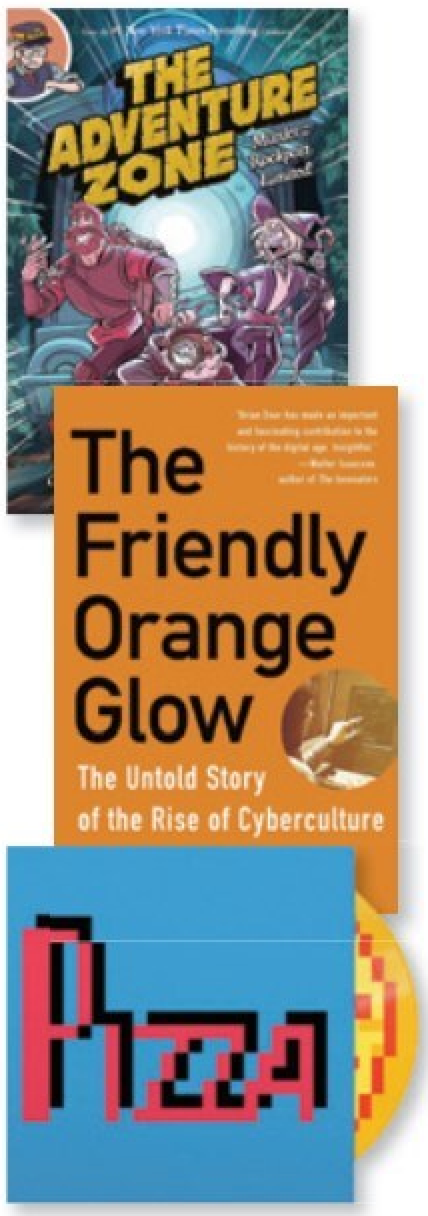

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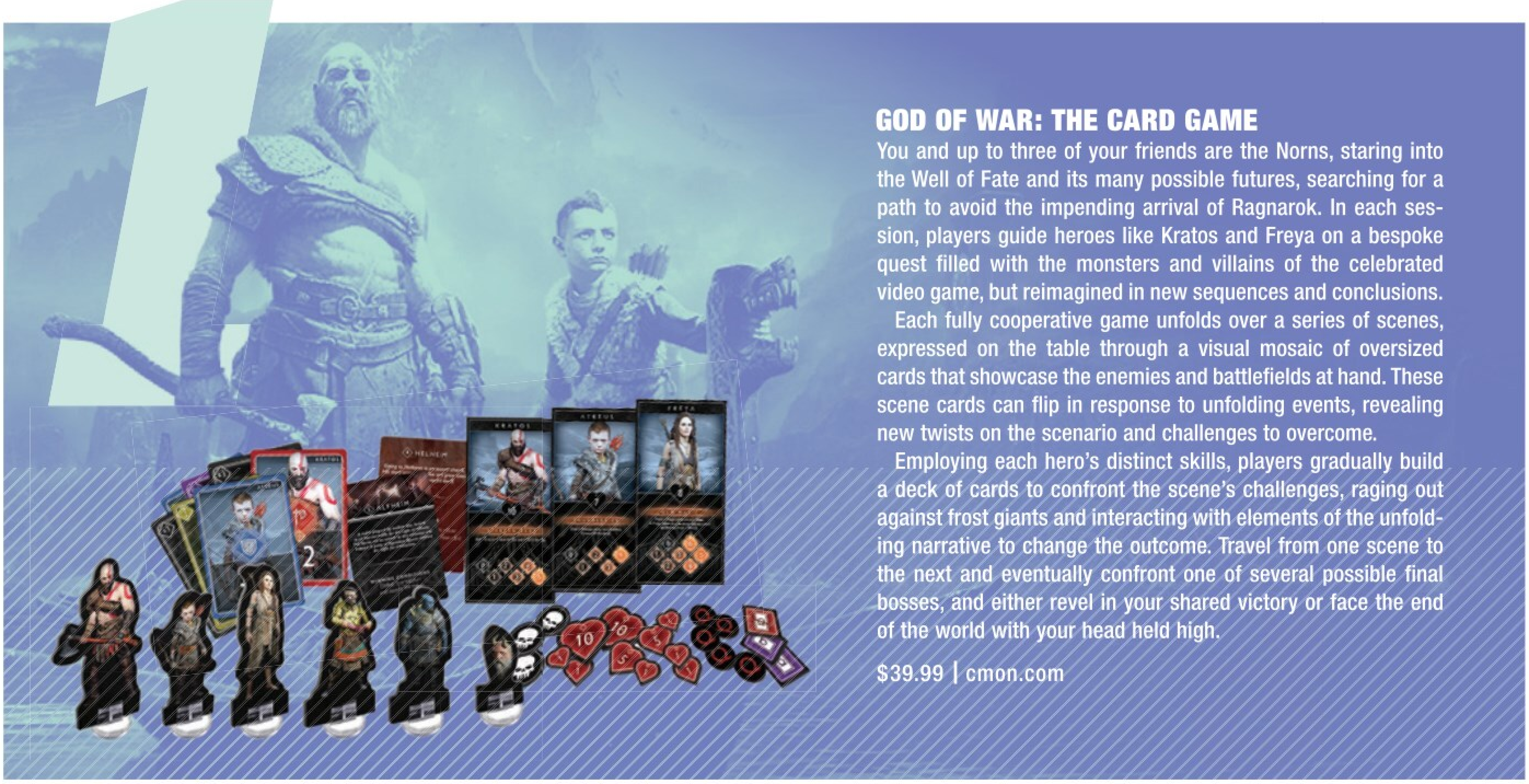
by Matt Miller



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You and up to three of your friends are the Norns, staring into the Well of Fate and its many possible futures, searching for a path to avoid the impending arrival of Ragnarok. In each session, players guide heroes like Kratos and Freya on a bespoke quest filled with the monsters and villains of the celebrated video game, but reimagined in new sequences and conclusions.

Each fully cooperative game unfolds over a series of scenes, expressed on the table through a visual mosaic of oversized cards that showcase the enemies and battlefields at hand. These scene cards can flip in response to unfolding events, revealing new twists on the scenario and challenges to overcome.

Employing each hero's distinct skills, players gradually build a deck of cards to confront the scene's challenges, raging out against frost giants and interacting with elements of the unfolding narrative to change the outcome. Travel from one scene to the next and eventually confront one of several possible final bosses, and either revel in your shared victory or face the end of the world with your head held high.

$39.99 | cmon.com

MARVEL CHAMPIONS

Fantasy Flight's newest card game is a fully cooperative adventure for one to four players. Take on the role of heroes like Iron Man, Captain Marvel, or Black Panther as they work together to thwart baddies like Ultron. Action-packed art evokes the comics as players fight back the villain's schemes, which unfold as a narrative sequence of encounters unique to your session. Each hero must also manage the life of their alter ego and their contribution to the cause; sometimes Peter Parker can be the key to victory when Spider-Man can't do it on his own.

The core set offers everything you need to enjoy the game, but the living card game formula means expansions release new heroes and scenarios every few weeks, if you want them. There's no chasing rare cards; every expansion includes the full collection of new game components, so you can choose how and when to play more.

$59.95 | fantasyflightgames.com

GAME OF THRONES: OATHBREAKER

Perfectly tapping into the deceit and treachery at the heart of the TV series, Oathbreaker transports players to the world of the TV show, and lets you figure out if you and your friends can come up with your own surprise ending to the saga. Five to eight players can join in on the fun in this game of social deduction firmly rooted in the stories, places, and characters of Westeros.

One player controls the King or Queen, and some of the other players are the lords and ladies who remain loyal. The rest are conspirators, working in secret to sow discord and chaos. But no one knows anyone else's true loyalties, even as political weddings, invasions at the Wall, and trials by combat unfold through missions and events. The sovereign casts powerful favor and suspicion cards on those they deem trustworthy, but the Iron Throne has always been a lonely seat. ◆

$35.00 | direwolfdigital.com

November2019

❶

GAME RELEASES

Tuesday 05
- › Just Dance 2020 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Wii, Stadia)
- › Planet Zoo (PC)

Friday 08
- › Death Stranding (PS4) ❶
- › Disney Tsum Tsum Festival (Switch)
- › Layton's Mystery Journey: Katrielle and the Millionaires' Conspiracy (Switch)
- › Need for Speed Heat (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › New Super Lucky's Tale (Switch)

Thursday 14
- › Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition (PC)

Friday 15
- › Jumanji: The Video Game (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)
- › Pokémon Sword & Shield (Switch)
- › Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Tuesday 19
- › Shenmue III (PS4, PC)

Friday 22
- › Doom Eternal (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Stadia, PC)

BARBECUE
SNEAKERS
ICE CREAM
COFFEE
❷

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Friday 01
- › Terminator: Dark Fate (theaters)

Monday 04
- › His Dark Materials (HBO)

Wednesday 06
- › The Apollo (HBO)

Friday 08
- › Doctor Sleep (theaters)

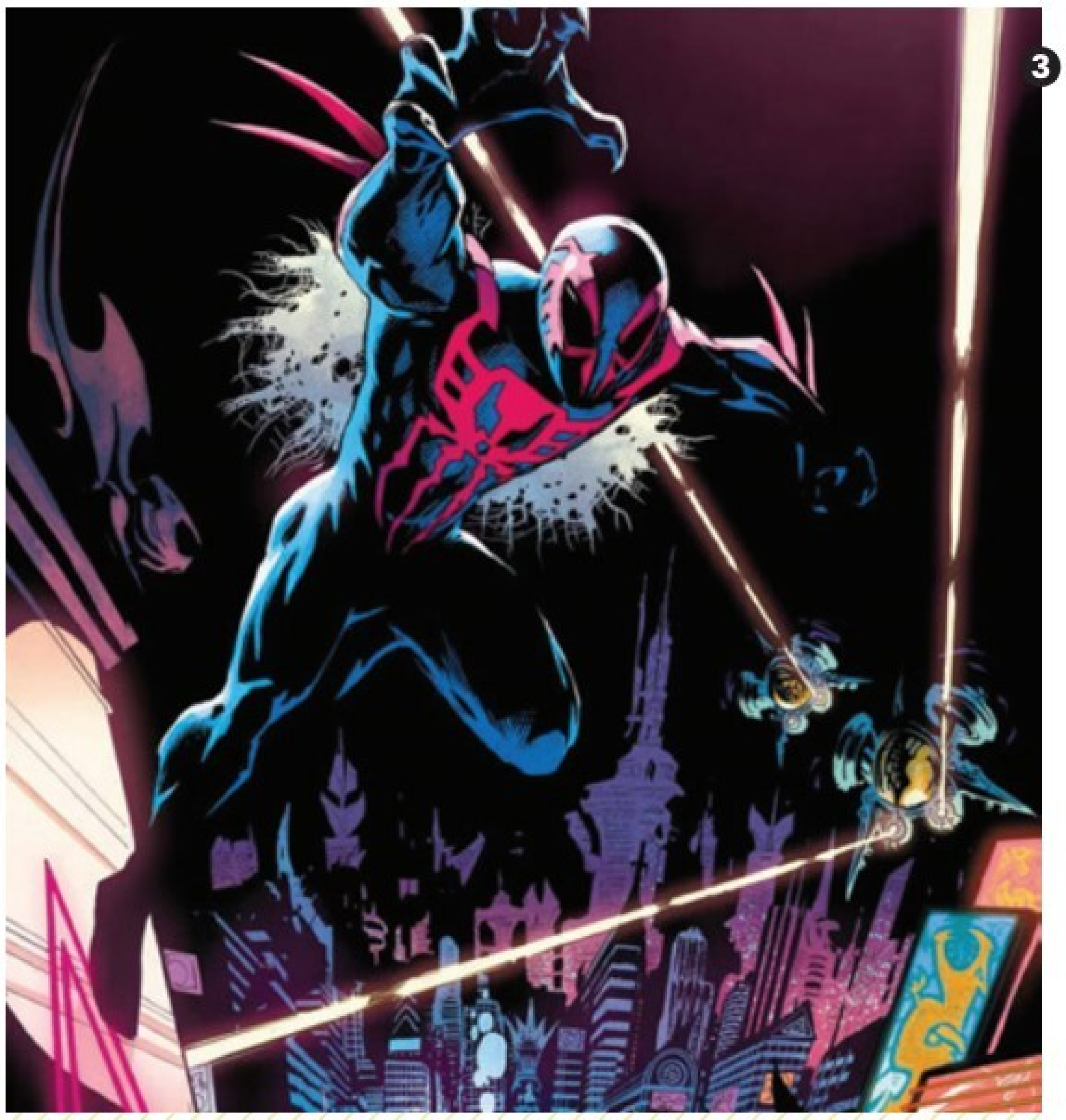
Tuesday 12
- › Forky Asks a Question (Disney+)
- › Lady and the Tramp (Disney+)
- › The Mandalorian (Disney+)
- › Marvel's Hero Project (Disney+)
- › The World According to Jeff Goldblum (Disney+) ❷

Friday 15
- › Charlie's Angels (theaters)
- › The Man in the High Castle (Amazon)

Sunday 17
- › The Crown (Netflix)

Friday 22
- › A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood (theaters)
- › Frozen II (theaters)

Friday 29
- › Knives Out (theaters)


❸

GAMER CULTURE

Friday 01
BlizzCon 2019
If Blizzard has any new games in the pipeline, they will likely get announced at the company's annual BlizzCon gathering, which kicks off today in Anaheim, Calif. Even if new games aren't in the cards, Blizzard always has plenty of announcements to make, which in the past included new Overwatch heroes, expansions for Hearthstone and World of Warcraft, and more. This show is also great for gaming, shopping, and cosplay.

Saturday 02
2099 Alpha & Omega ❸
Marvel Comics is returning to the year 2099 for a big universe-shaking event that spins out of The Amazing Spider-Man's issues 33 and 34. Miguel O'Hara, the Spider-Man from 2099, is back in the present with a dire warning of the future. This story is continued in 2099 Alpha and 2099 Omega, and then splinters into standalone books for the Fantastic Four, Conan, Ghost Rider, Venom, Doom, Spider-Man, and the Punisher.

Friday 08
PUBG Global Championship
Starting today in Los Angeles and concluding in Oakland on November 24, the PUBG Global Championship welcomes 32 teams to the stage to compete for millions in prize money. Like all big esports events these days, this one will be streamed worldwide.

Saturday 16
Geek Girl Con
Held for two days in Seattle, Geek Girl Con explores women and girls' passions into gaming, comics, technology, science, and literature. Activities range from gaming and workshops to panels and special events. ◆

» PLATFORM
Switch

» STYLE
1-Player Role-Playing
(4-Player Online)

» PUBLISHER
The Pokémon Company,
Nintendo

» DEVELOPER
Game Freak

» RELEASE
November 15

GOING

BIG

The behind-the-scenes story of Pokémon's next evolution

by
BRIAN SHEA

Since Pokémon's debut, the mainline series has existed solely on handheld devices. Being able to adventure in the world of Pokémon while being anywhere in the real world is enticing, but fans have long clamored to see the series deliver a mainline console RPG. However, developer Game Freak was reluctant to create a game that players couldn't take with them. The release of the hybrid Nintendo Switch changed everything.

Now, unrestrained by the traditional limitations of dedicated handheld devices, Game Freak sets out to make what it considers to be the ultimate version of Pokémon. We traveled to the team's Tokyo headquarters to learn the inspirations behind the various additions and advancements of Pokémon Sword and Shield.

Walking into the unassuming Carrot Tower in Tokyo, you would never guess the creators of the highest-grossing entertainment franchise in the world were just a couple hundred feet above you. After a short elevator ride and a stroll through a plain, twisting hallway, a door opens to a conference room and you're suddenly presented with the rich history that has been made here. Lining the walls of the conference room is every game, every soundtrack, and hundreds of figures from the world's largest entertainment juggernaut.

While the shelves housing the mainline entries of the Pokémon series read like a history book for Nintendo's handheld devices, when you get to the end, Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu and Let's Go, Eevee immediately stick out as the sole console entries. The games, which released last year on Nintendo's current flagship platform, effectively transitioned the series to the hybrid format. But while those reimaginings of the first-generation games served as a crowd-pleasing bridge to the next evolution of the franchise, they did more for the development teams at Game Freak.

The Pokémon Let's Go games served as a way for the studio to get down the development basics for Nintendo's new console – introducing new features, like wild Pokémon appearing in the environments and a giant leap forward in terms of visuals. Fans enjoyed these games and loved having a modern remake as a starting point for the franchise on Switch, but Game Freak had greater ambitions with the new technology than simply recreating past glories.

During the development of the Let's Go games, the team realized creating games on Switch was no small task when compared to developing on lower-resolution handheld devices. "I think the biggest takeaway was how the graphics and rendering work is so different from the 3DS," says Pokémon Sword and Shield director Shigeru Ohmori. "Needing to staff up and figure out how we're able to get that to work really well on Switch takes more time, and we needed more resources."

The studio grew in size, nearly doubling the core team since the development of Sun and Moon. With 180 to 200 core members, hundreds of outsourced and external partners, and a large marketing department, the full team is massive. When you factor in the localization teams across the nine languages the game is launching in, Ohmori estimates that around 1,000 names will appear in the credits of Pokémon Sword and Shield.

Using key takeaways from the Let's Go games, the rapidly growing team at Game Freak forged ahead with its vision for the next generation of Pokémon games. "We set out with the idea of making the ultimate, strongest, the best Pokémon game yet, being on Nintendo Switch, the first time an all-new generation is coming to a console," Ohmori says. "It was really just kind of applying this idea of 'ultimate' to every facet of the game: gameplay, visuals, everything. That was really the theme for when I set out making the game: the greatest Pokémon game."

BATTLING THE STATUS QUO

To craft the "ultimate" Pokémon game, Game Freak put everything under a microscope. Across seven generations and five video game systems to this point, familiar battle mechanics that have stood the test of time always carry over in the series. Since the beginning, players have taken part in turn-based battles with Pokémon that can learn up to four moves. Despite that basic formula remaining firmly in place over the years, Game Freak has explored ways to change it up.

"I think with the Pokémon games, you're taking the elements that existed before and add onto them with every game, but we don't just take the elements for granted," says planning director Kazumasa Iwao. "Each time we make a new game, we review what's there and make sure they make sense for the project and that we're confident we can make them fun for the next game."

According to Ohmori, the team even thought about changing up the very core of the battle system from the traditional turn-based experience, but reconsidered when thinking of the initial themes for this next entry. "With Sword and Shield, we felt like expressing the turn-based battles in their ultimate form," he says.

With that level of willingness to re-examine the core tenets of the series, the team looked toward other ways to experiment without completely disrupting the beloved balance. Even mainstays like Pokémon being able to learn four moves was looked at. The studio considered bumping the number of moves up to five, or even down to three, but nothing felt right.

"If you make it five or even more than five, that makes it so a lot of the Pokémon can really do anything, and it becomes a lot harder to read what your opponent might do because there are just that many more possibilities of moves they could use," Iwao says. "I think that hurts the balance of the gameplay quite a bit. At the same time, even if you reduce it by one to three, you really start seeing there are haves and have nots in the Pokémon world. Like, these Pokémon are obviously way stronger than the rest of these Pokémon. We keep coming back and finding that four is the right number for the current battle system, but it is something we revisit."

One recent example of Game Freak changing things up with the series prior to this generation is how Pokémon Sun and Moon did away with Hidden Machines (HMs). This convention, which was in place since Pokémon Red and Blue, allowed players to teach moves that Pokémon can use both in and out of battle. They acted as keys of sorts, allowing players to access new areas once they obtain the right HM and corresponding gym badge to allow them to use the ability outside of battle. In Pokémon Sun and Moon, those HMs were replaced by Ride Pokémon. The team wanted to give players a higher degree of freedom in Pokémon Sword and Shield, and as such, didn't feel the concept of HMs fit into the themes of the new game.

While that modernization is carried over from Sun and Moon, several new elements are being introduced into Sword and Shield that differentiate it from past games. The Exp. Share item, which spreads experience points learned to all Pokémon in your party is no more. Instead, Sword and Shield automatically spreads out the experience without an item.

WHY DID A CONSOLE GAME TAKE SO LONG?

Since the series' inception on Game Boy in the 1990s, fans have begged Game Freak for a mainline Pokémon RPG for home consoles. Until the release of the Nintendo Switch, that project would have compromised what Game Freak considers one of the series' most important aspects.

"We think it's really important to not have the experience be totally closed," says producer Junichi Masuda. "Having it facilitate the real-life interactions – playing with friends in the same space, and talking with each other – facilitating that is a part of the Pokémon experience, rather than just what's happening on the screen. It's fun to play alone at home as well, but it's probably more fun if you're playing with friends at a festival."

Masuda also points toward the in-store Pokémon distributions that happen at retailers across the world. During these in-store events, players can bring their systems in or obtain an exclusive card to download a special Pokémon. "We do that so you can go there to that location and you may run into a friend or meet somebody you didn't know before and connect through the game," he says. "Those moments turn into memories and add value to that Pokémon you get; every time you see it, you'll remember that experience, and we think those experiences are valuable."

Now, with the Switch offering the best of both the home console and handheld worlds, Game Freak is excited to finally give fans the mainline Pokémon RPG they've been wanting for decades without sacrificing its desire to have the games be portable.

Alcremie
Lv.50
125/125

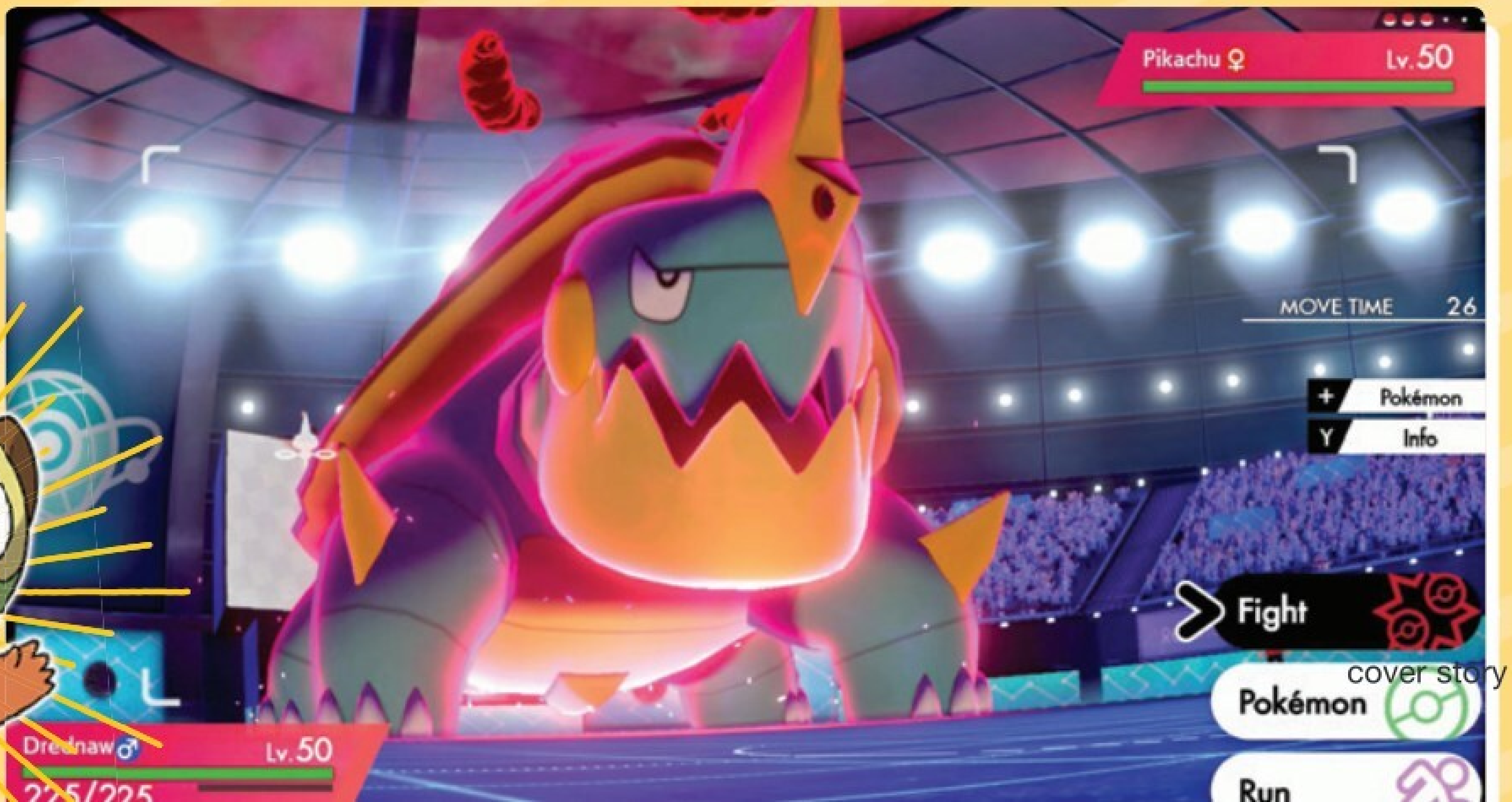
In perhaps the biggest modernization to the core elements of the Pokémon franchise, the game now autosaves. In past mainline Pokémon games, you had to remember to stop and save occasionally or run the risk of losing substantial progress if you turned off the system or your batteries died. With Sword and Shield, players benefit from an autosave functionality that seamlessly records your progress in the background as you go. However, for those who want a more traditional Pokémon experience of stopping the action to manually save, you can turn this feature off; I imagine that will be a popular option when it comes to facing off against Legendary Pokémon.

Competitive players also have a new way to fill their parties, as a new backend parameter helps players use the Pokémon they catch from the outset of play in competitive battles. "Traditionally in the series, you start with your starter Pokémon and then you catch a lot of Pokémon in the beginning, and those are with you throughout your whole adventure, and the player gets attached to them," Iwao says. "But a lot of times, they get into the competitive battles and they find they can't actually use those Pokémon or they're not competitive, so they have to go out and find the exact right Pokémon or breed them in a certain way to make sure they're viable in competitive battle."

To address that issue, Pokémon Sword and Shield introduces new systems that allow your favorite Pokémon to become useable in competitive matches. While Game Freak won't elaborate too much, Iwao says players will know it when they see it. In previous games, you could have a Pokémon with all the right stats, but a personality that makes it a bad choice for competitive, meaning it wasn't the best choice in high-level matches. With Pokémon Sword and Shield, players can still breed to try and obtain the perfect specimen, but they also have ways to circumvent that problem. "We're doing a lot of stuff in the back end introducing systems that allow players to make sure that Pokémon they want to use in competitive battles are viable," Iwao says.

These changes are just the start of what sets Pokémon Sword and Shield apart from prior Pokémon games, but before the team could really fit the pieces together, it needed to decide on where it would take place.

Call Pokémon
X Menu



GOING TO GALAR

Concepts for what is now known as Pokémon Sword and Pokémon Shield began floating around during the development of Pokémon Sun and Moon, but it wasn't until the media tour for those games that things started to click into place. While touring the world in the lead up to the release of 2016's Sun and Moon, Game Freak co-founder and Sword and Shield producer Junichi Masuda became fascinated by London and the U.K. "I remember being there with the feeling of the country and I was also looking at the history and the strength the country has; that inspired me to base the region off that," he says.

Masuda and Ohmori began kicking around ideas for a region inspired by the U.K. To brainstorm, the team turned internally to an invaluable asset: James Turner, who has been designing Pokémon since the fifth generation of the series. While he now resides in Tokyo to work at the Game Freak headquarters, he grew up on the British countryside.

Throughout his time at Game Freak, the team spoke highly of the U.K., but it was never in serious consideration to be a region for a game. However, at a certain point, Turner began picking up on some hints that his home country might be in the running. "I was working on a different project and they were beginning development on what would become Sword and Shield, and I would hear from people working on it, 'We have some things we want to ask you about. We need your opinion on something,' and I'd be pulled away from what I was doing" he says. "It became pretty clear they were thinking about England and they wanted my opinion about the English countryside or the culture and stuff like that."

Eventually, the quick questions about England became inquiries about him joining the team for the next Pokémon game. When it was revealed the studio was planning a region called Galar based on the U.K., Turner's brain kicked into overdrive thinking about what in the U.K. could translate into a Pokémon game and what should be highlighted.

Turner was named art director for the project and he began making a list of what he hoped to accomplish with the design of the new region. Having grown up away from the major cities, he knew the importance of making the countryside just right. "The greenery of the countryside, the patchwork farmlands – that's a really beautiful aspect – the pretty small towns, and the big cities as well – they can be really impressive; I wanted to get that across in the game."

In addition to getting the beauty of the rolling hills and the impressive nature of the cities across, Turner wanted to bring a level of authenticity to the region beyond just the landmarks everyone knows from postcards. "I also wanted to convey the small details that people who come from the U.K. or people who visit the U.K. a lot, they can look at them and feel familiar, and it doesn't feel like a rough interpretation, but something that is really true to the details," he says.

One example of Turner helping the studio accomplish this came with the signboards scattered across the region. Initially, the designer of the signboards used a medieval fantasy style for the signs. Turner rejected the design in favor of pursuing something more authentic to the real-life region. He pushed the team to create something more familiar to people who have been to the U.K., recreating the kinds of fonts and color schemes used in the actual signs in Britain.

Despite this push for authenticity in the Galar region paying homage to the U.K., Turner understands players want variety and exaggerations in the world. "It is based on the U.K., but there are more colorful locations as well within the game to create a sense of adventure," he says.

Zigzagoon♂ Lv.16
38/38
X
Y Info
Fight
Pokémon
Bag
Run
X
Y Info
Fight
Pokémon
Bag
Run
Linoone♂ Lv.28
81/81

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Pokémon Sword and Shield's name draws inspiration from the setting of the Galar region, but a lot more goes into naming than just picking something related to the area. Traditionally, the names of mainline Pokémon games have some relationship to the themes of the game or other games in the series.

After two generations of color-based games in Red and Blue followed by Gold and Silver, Masuda thought of Ruby and Sapphire as the start of the "jewel" series, which concluded with the following generation's Diamond and Pearl. For Black and White, while it was technically a return to color-based naming conventions the series started with, he more wanted to represent two opposing colors. However, starting with X and Y, Masuda was presented with a unique challenge as it was the first time the games were launching worldwide simultaneously.

"We wanted to make sure we had a title that would be shared across all the different countries, so we wouldn't have to localize the titles," Masuda says of Pokémon X and Y. "Up until then, all the titles had been localized; Red was *Rouge* in French. I wanted to make sure for the first title to be released worldwide at the same time, it would be a name that could be the same everywhere."

For Sword and Shield, Masuda wanted to look toward the themes of creating the strongest, ultimate version of Pokémon. The names Sword and Shield weren't decided until the last minute. However, the team had art for the two Legendary Pokémon. One was a dog holding a sword in its mouth, while the other was a dog with a head shaped like a shield.

The name derived from the Legendary Pokémon fit in with both the themes Masuda wanted to pursue, as well as the region, but it also took on new meaning for the team. "When a person goes to choose which version they want, maybe in the back of their mind, if they had power or strength, would they use it to fight or use it to protect? Maybe deciding what they would do with power when they choose which version to get," he says.

The final order of business when it came to naming was to decide what those Legendary dogs that inspired the names of the games should be called. "Those were the last things we were able to determine. We thought it would be interesting to go back to colors with the Legendary Pokémon," Ohmori says. "One of the things I had in my head was that in the Galar region, these were just kind of rumors; no one has actually seen them in the story. 'I saw this red knight or this blue knight-looking creature.' That's the myth in the region, and I had this initial idea of 'The Cyan' or 'The Magenta.' Rather than going 100-percent straight like that, we played a little bit on the sound, like 'Zacian' and 'Zamazenta,' 'The Cyan' and 'The Magenta' to make it more like a name. The actual idea is that people would be like, 'That Cyan!' or 'That Magenta!' They're describing it."

Yamper♀ Lv.50
MOVE TIME 56
+ Pokémon
Y Info
Fight
Pokémon
Run
Scorbunny♂ Lv.50
165/165

CREATING A POKÉMON

With just over 800 Pokémon currently in the National Pokédex, the series is bound to eclipse the 1,000 mark either this generation or the following one. With so many distinct designs and styles, it's remarkable the team can continue churning them out the way it has over the last couple decades.

The process of creating a Pokémon is an intense one, often beginning with a simple request to an artist. These requests are often saying they need a concept of a Pokémon for a particular scenario or are looking for a specific direction for a new creature. From there, the artist creates quick sketches with few details, which are shown to the team requesting to see if they're heading in the correct direction. The groups iterate on the design based on feedback, with the gaps getting longer and longer each time as the artist adds more and more detail with each iteration.

For art director James Turner, who has been designing Pokémon since Gen V, one of the major challenges is coming up with something that hasn't yet been seen in the series. "There are a lot of Pokémon," Turner says. "To me, it's like trying to park in a really crowded car park or something. You're going this way, there's a car there. You're going this way, there's a car. You're trying to find some unique space. This color scheme has been used before, this animal has been used before. You're trying to find something unique. That's important."

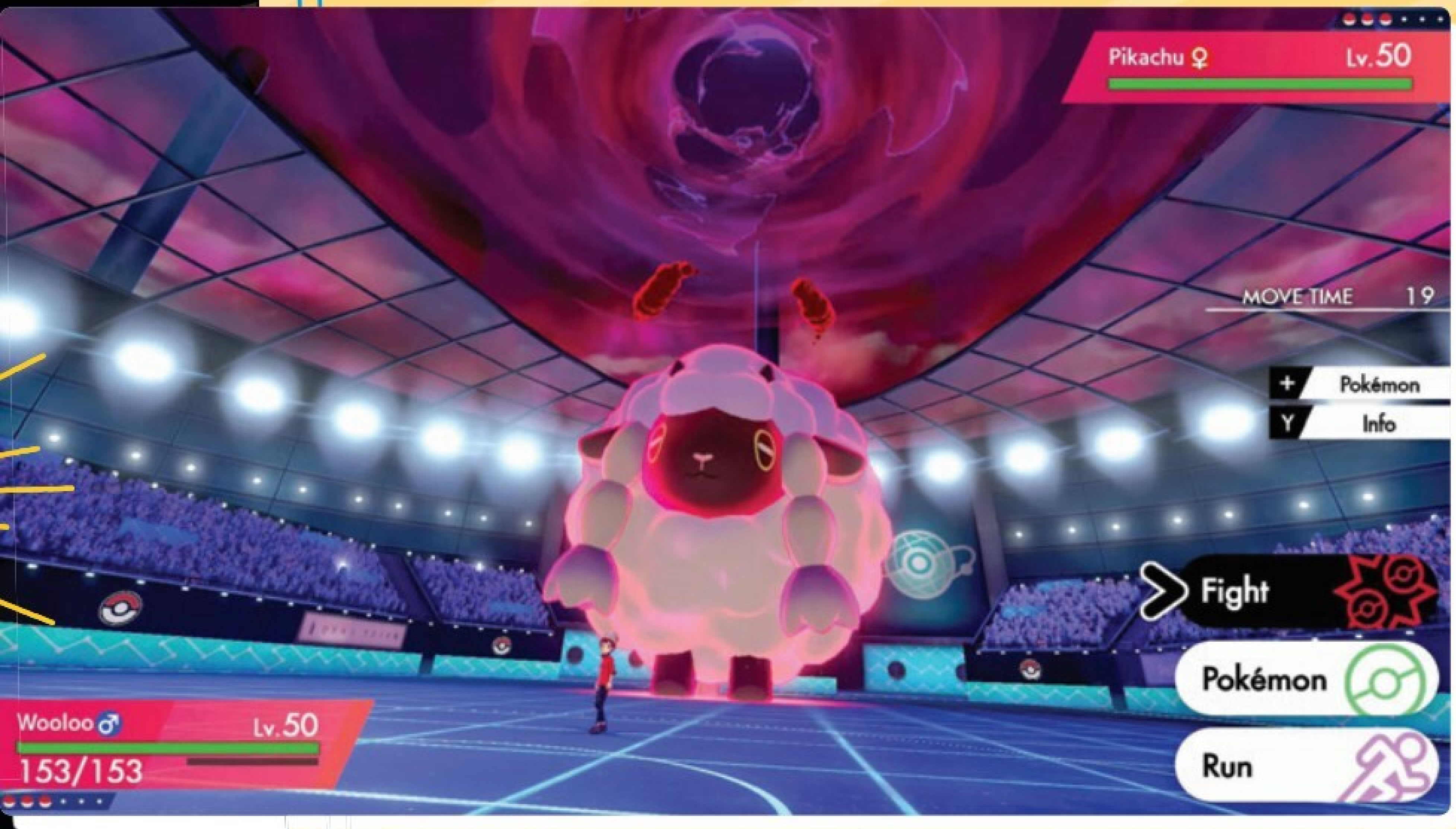
On top of that, it's important that every aspect of a Pokémon's design has potential real-world functionality and logic behind it. "You can't just come up with a cool looking design or a cute-looking design that hasn't got any logic behind it," Turner says. "This Pokémon has these cool, big horns, and it looks mean and tough, but why would it have those horns? How does it live? How does it exist in this environment? That's really important. If there's no meaning behind the decorations, then they're not really necessary for the design. We have to think about how this creature exists in the world and how it lives in the world."

As a part of this process, only a very small percentage of concepted Pokémon make it onto the final lineup of creatures. According to Turner, it's close to two or three out of every 10 Pokémon drawn make that into that game. However, once a concepted Pokémon makes it to a certain point down the design path, it's rare they're outright stopped.

Many of these concerns are addressed in meetings where the teams come together and determine which concepted Pokémon are in the game and which are out. It's not always about the design of the Pokémon in question; sometimes it's about the game already having a new electric or rock Pokémon and not needing another.

"There are really quite detailed opinions about that kind of stuff," Turner says. "When you see a Pokémon at first, you think, 'Oh that's a cool design.' But then if you start to think about it logically: Why would it exist in this world and what role would it have? Even though they are cool designs, there can be opinions that come up that makes it, 'Actually that doesn't quite fit within what we want to do this time around.' There are a lot of detailed discussions."

For those Pokémon that don't make it into the game, there's good news: The "rejected" designs often return in later games. "People submit designs for one generation, and they don't get approved," Turner says. "It might be just because it doesn't fit within that region or it might be because the idea is not fully cooked yet. So they will go away with that design, and then the next region, the next game will start and they'll bring it back, and maybe they've modified it a little bit, or maybe it fits better within the lineup, and those designs go ahead. I've seen them become final Pokémon within certain games."



TURNING TRAINERS INTO STARS

In addition to getting the visual design to feel authentic, Game Freak wanted to embrace the sports-centric culture of the U.K. Trainers are treated like star athletes, complete with collectible League Cards. While filling your albums with League Cards from A.I. and human trainers can be a fun goal (each card even has trivia or information about the trainer's personality on the back), I enjoyed creating my own League Card, even with an extremely limited selection available in the build.

Even before customizing my character's appearance on the card, I can choose from different backgrounds, effects, and frames. From there, I reposition my trainer on the card, and adjust their pose and facial expression before slapping a laminate coat of my choosing over the entire card.

You can also equip your trainer with a jersey and give them a number. However, if you'd rather go for a more casual look, Pokémon Sword and Shield gives you more customization options than has ever been seen in the series.

Past entries let you customize your outfit by selecting a top and a bottom, but now you can take it down to a granular level. Sword and Shield's trainer customization options allow you to choose shirts, jackets, pants, dresses, socks, shoes, backpacks, hats, glasses, and gloves. You can also choose from several hairstyles to complete the look.

The team wanted shopping in the Galar region to remind you of shopping in a fashionable street in England. "That can feel very familiar for people who live in the U.K.," Turner says. "There were a lot of bits here and there that I pulled from my own experience."

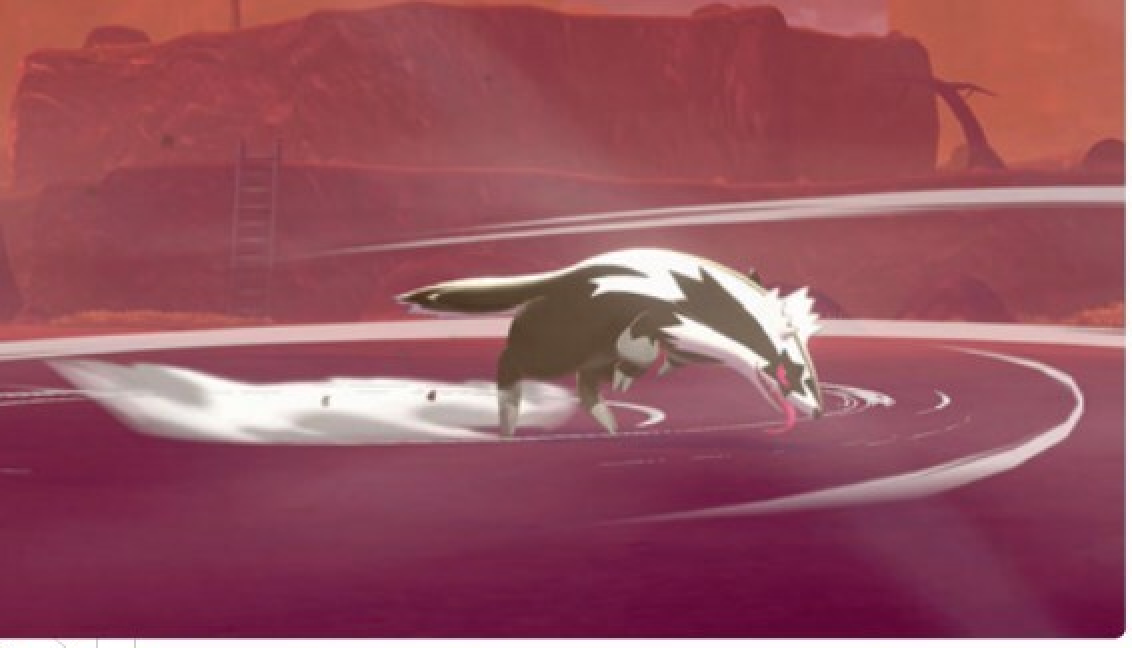
Much like shopping in real life, you're going to want to scour all the stores possible to find the right piece to complete your outfit; you can't just go to one store and expect to see the entire collection of clothes. "There's actually different clothing brands that serve different genres of clothing, and you'll find that different towns specialize in some genres over the others," Ohmori says.

Fashion even changes from town to town, encouraging players to bounce around to find the perfect look. "Big-city fashion is different from small-city fashion, and then there are more kind of punkish towns you can visit too," Turner says.

The tribute to British sports culture continues with stadiums full of people during big battles. This setting delivers a new kind of atmosphere not seen in mainline Pokémon games to this point. The crowd reacts as action unfolds in the arena, including uproars, cheers, chants, and songs. The stadium itself also changes with the action, with certain things displayed on the screens around the arena, as well as music that plays.

All of these elements brought by the Galar region felt like a natural fit for the Pokémon series, but where it proved most valuable was in helping Game Freak begin to pull together disparate elements it wanted to implement into one cohesive vision.

Zweilous
Fig
Poké
Bag
Ru
Drednaw ♂ Lv.50
150/150



GIANT AMBITIONS

The team had various ideas in mind for new features that could appear across the adventure, but they were nebulous and unattached. Several of the ideas they had in mind suddenly started snapping into place thanks to the idea of basing a game in a region inspired by the U.K.

"Just in general for a Pokémon game's development and where the ideas come from, usually in our heads we have all these different ideas, existing as individual parts," Masuda says. "For example, maybe we'll have an idea for a connectivity feature, or a battle feature, or a Pokémon, then they're kind of all existing in your head, then you'll have these moments where, for example, you're traveling or you're going to a media interview session and you'll feel the atmosphere of that location and all of it will come together like, 'This is a good location to feature all of these other ideas I already had in my mind.'"

"There were definitely a lot of ideas," Ohmori says. "There were a lot of ideas we explored for this game that we ended up not using. It all goes back to us having these individual parts swimming in our heads and finding the right one that makes sense for the game."

One of those ideas that seemingly snapped into place with a U.K.-inspired region was the new Max Raid Battles. For the first all-new console game in the series, Ohmori wanted to include a feature that reminded him of his younger days playing Nintendo 64 in the same room with his friends. He began brainstorming for ways to recreate that feeling, but didn't have any great ideas. He eventually found inspiration in the mythologies of giants involved in the founding of ancient Britain.

The result is Max Raid Battles, where players can gather together with other trainers to take on massive Pokémon together. If the team of players can take down the giant creature, the trainers are rewarded with the opportunity to catch the defeated Pokémon. While that may sound familiar to anyone who has played Pokémon Go, the idea actually predates the implementation of raids in the mobile smash hit.

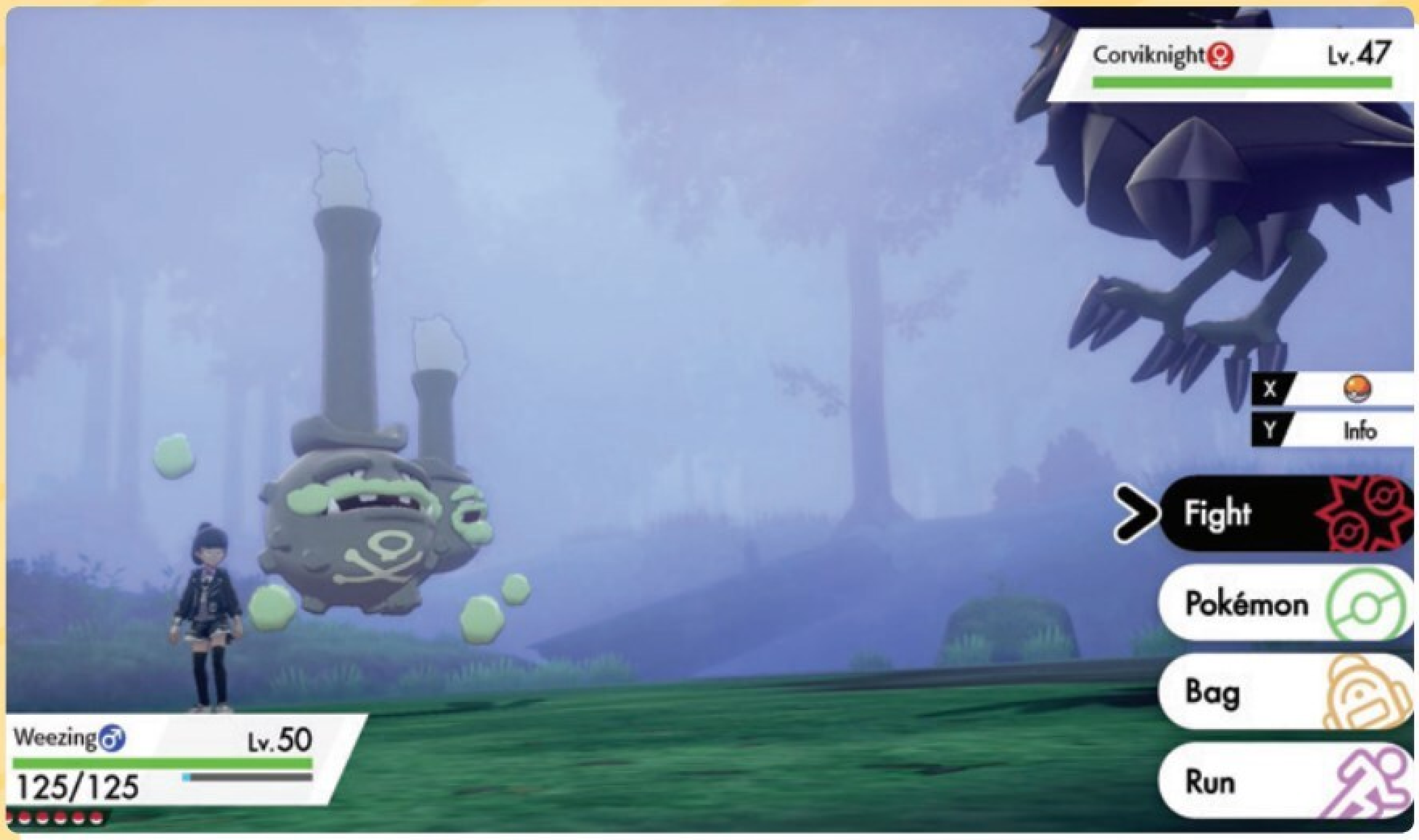
"The initial concept of having cooperative battles against a Pokémon – the raid idea – came before raids were even implemented in Pokémon Go, but we saw Pokémon Go implement this raid feature and how popular it was for people to get together in the same space and enjoy these cooperative experiences," Ohmori says. "I think there was some influence, like how in Pokémon Go, you don't need to be a hardcore battler to enjoy the raid battles; it's really easy to invite a friend. We wanted to have that element in Sword and Shield's raid encounters as well."

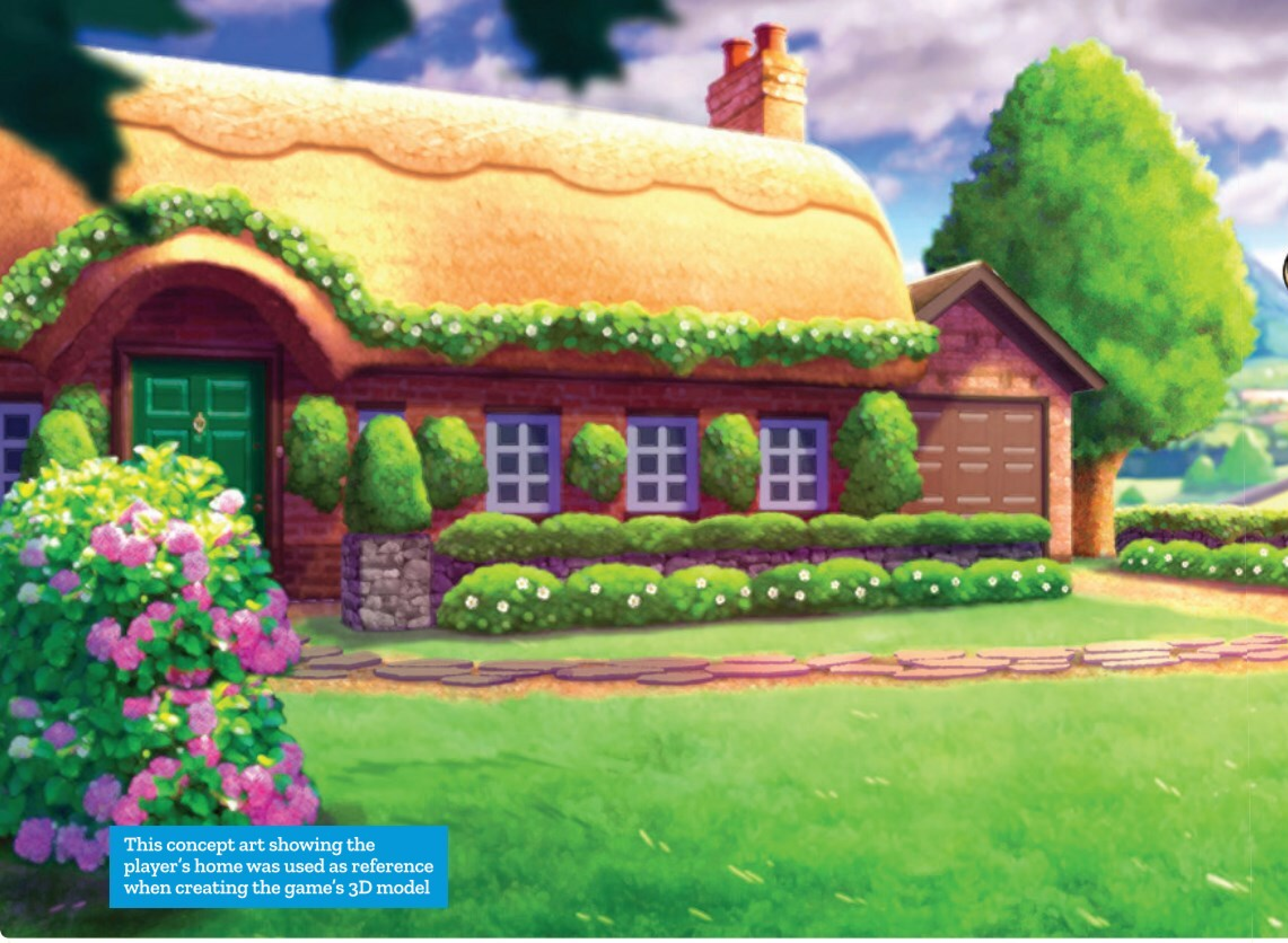
However, before raids were introduced in Pokémon Go, this mechanic in Pokémon Sword and Shield was simply referred to as "cooperative battles." With the term "raid" now cemented in the lexicon of millions of Pokémon fans across the world, Game Freak decided to play off that word to make the feature instantly recognizable for a large chunk of its fan base.

Much like Pokémon Go's raids, the battles are ranked using a star system; the more stars a raid has, the more difficult it will be for players. According to Iwao, players might be in for a rude awakening if they think they can just coast through the higher-ranked Max Raid Battles.

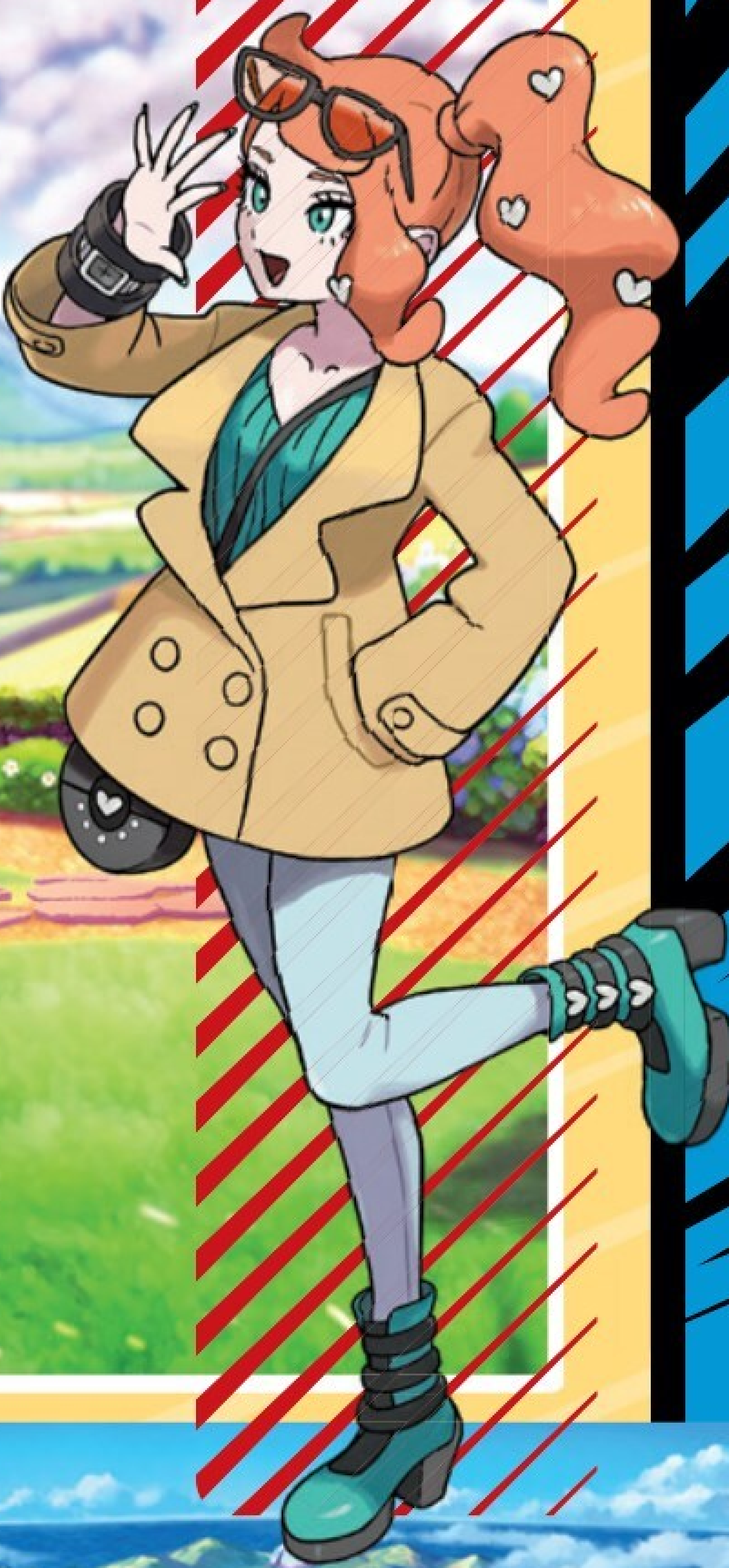
"I think it's going to have a kind of difficulty we haven't seen in a lot of main series Pokémon games up until now," Iwao says. "Even for me, a seasoned Pokémon player, even if I go with one of the five-star Max Raid Battles, I can definitely run into situations where I'm not able to win."

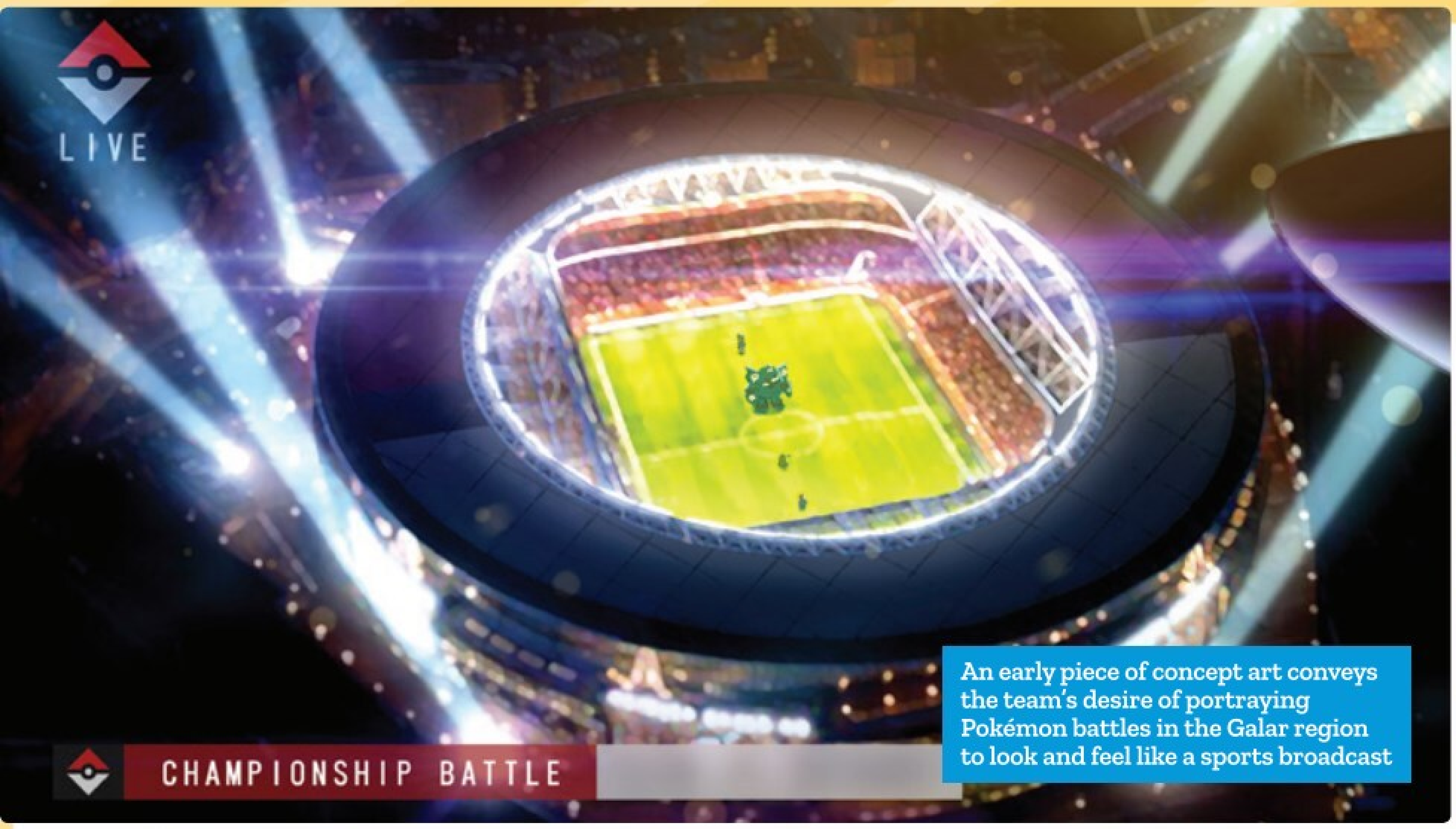
Thankfully, you can alleviate headaches by joining up with friends or choosing raid levels appropriate for your team of Pokémon. Even if you go into a Max Raid Battle alone, A.I. teammates will join to fight alongside you. In addition, you can also even the odds by temporarily growing your own Pokémon to massive scales using one of Sword and Shield's centerpiece new features: Dynamax.



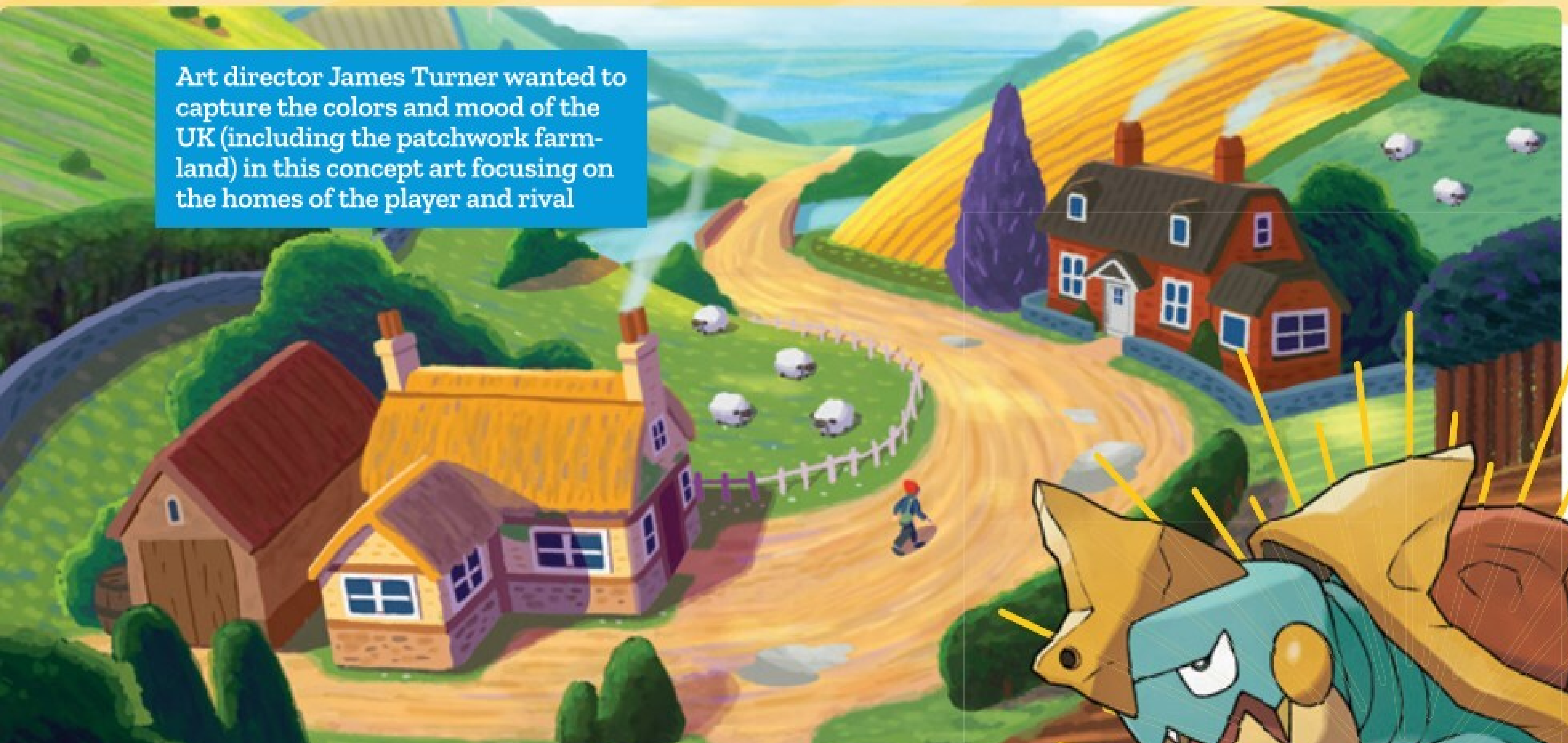


This concept art showing the player's home was used as reference when creating the game's 3D model

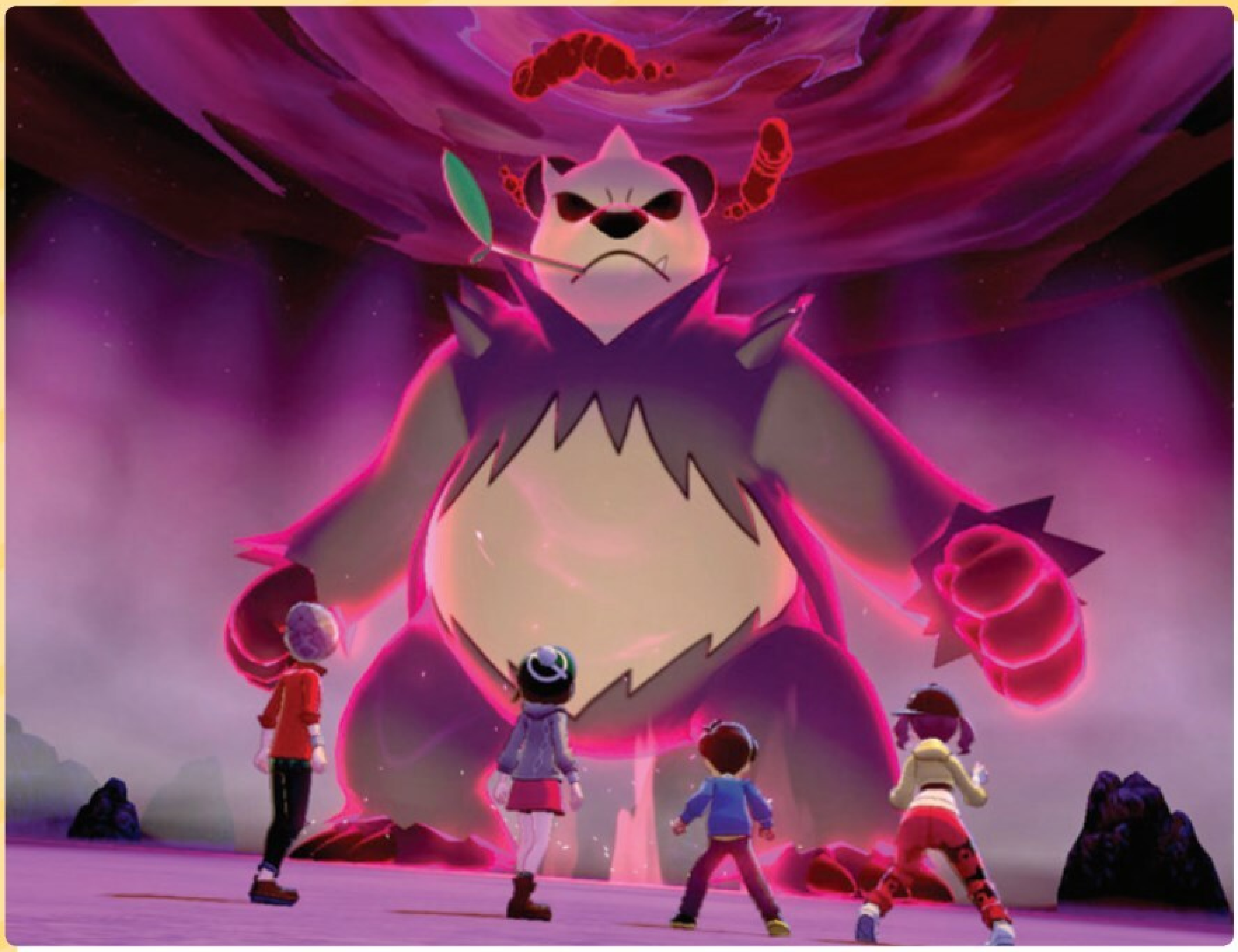


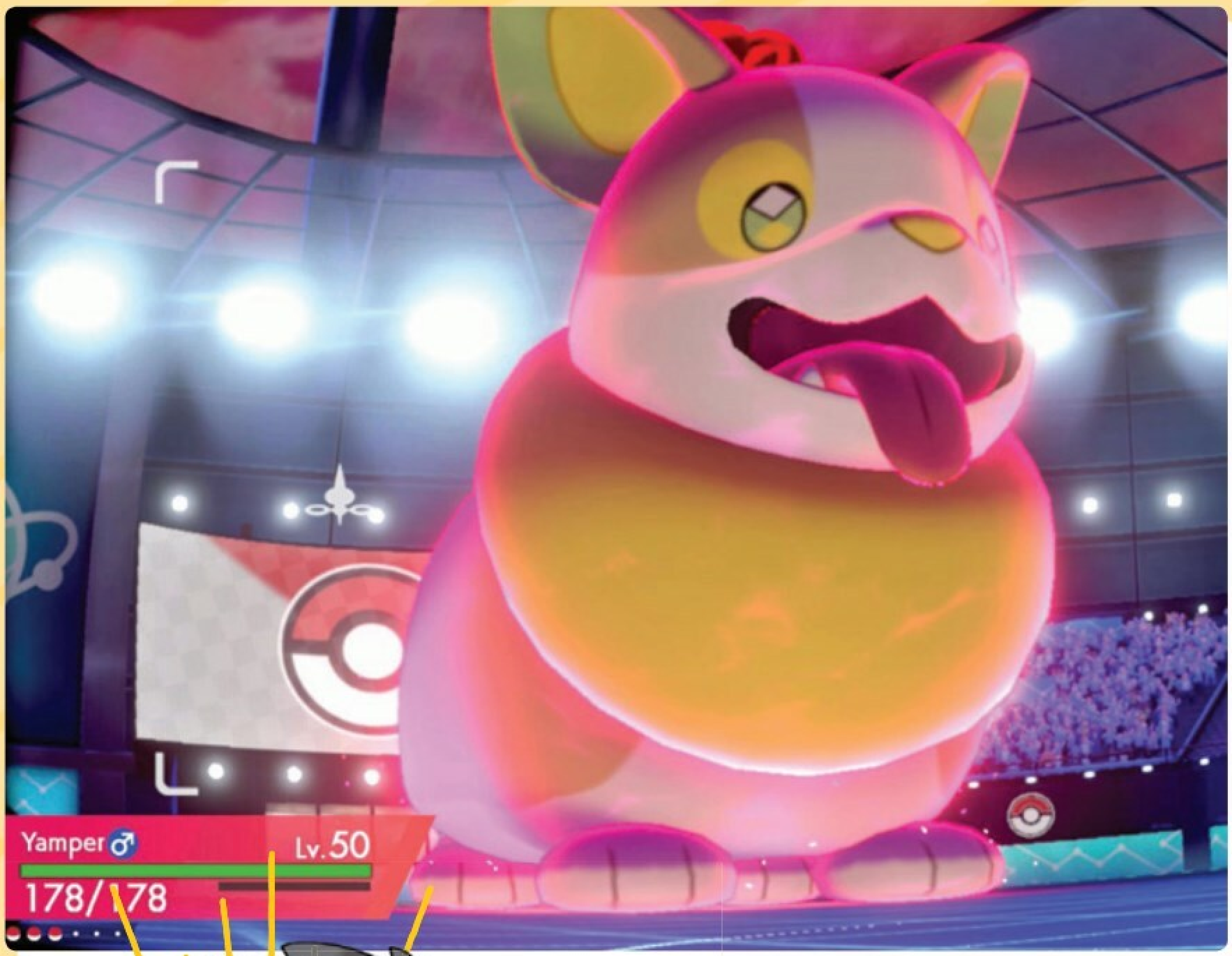


An early piece of concept art conveys the team's desire of portraying Pokémon battles in the Galar region to look and feel like a sports broadcast



Art director James Turner wanted to capture the colors and mood of the UK (including the patchwork farmland) in this concept art focusing on the homes of the player and rival





TAKING IT TO THE MAX

While Dynamax's inspiration was a direct result of Ohmori's understanding of U.K. myths, the inclusion of Pokémon on this scale simply wasn't possible in a satisfactory way on handheld devices. Game Freak wanted to use the higher resolution of the Switch and the larger screens of televisions to demonstrate a strong sense of scale. Not only do the enormous Pokémon look bigger than ever before, but the small Pokémon on the roster also look appropriately small.

This is further on display when players use Dynamax to make their Pokémon grow to unprecedented sizes. Seeing a Dynamaxed Pokémon next to a trainer on a big screen shows off the scale Game Freak hoped for. Ohmori says this display would only be possible on a high-resolution platform like the Switch. "On the 3DS, if you showed some of the huge Pokémon, the limited resolution would probably make the player character be like a single pixel or something," he says with a chuckle.

The concept of having Pokémon grow to become giants satisfied another goal of the team going into its first all-new console Pokémon game. "If you're playing on the TV, there's probably going to be other people in the house like family or your parents," Ohmori says. "We wanted to make what you were doing on the screen look impressive or something that makes it look like, if the kid is playing it and the mom comes by like, 'Wow, you're really doing something cool there!' Kind of like the idea of it being a sport, for example. It's impressive to watch as a sport, and maybe the kid is like a really powerful sports player."

Outside of impressive visual sequences showcasing larger creatures and a colorful aura, Dynamaxed Pokémon also feature much more powerful attacks. Even the most useless Pokémon like Magikarp can suddenly become formidable through Dynamax. This mechanic replaces systems from past games like X and Y's Mega Evolutions, and Sun and Moon's Z-Moves as the powerful equalizer in battle.

To take the new feature for a test drive,

Game Freak held an internal tournament. The team came away confident that not only will competitive play embrace the Dynamax ability, but it will add an extra layer of strategy for players of all skill levels.

"You don't have to give the Pokémon an item, so you can trigger it whenever and create this element of suspense or keeping people on their toes since they don't know when you're going to trigger it or what Pokémon you're going to use for it," Ohmori says. "In Sun and Moon, with the Z-Moves, you had to give the Pokémon the Z-Crystal to trigger it, so if the effect of any item goes off, you know that Pokémon isn't holding a Z-Crystal and you can feel at ease and then plan your strategy around that. With Dynamax, since it doesn't require an item, you're never going to have that feeling of being at ease since you don't know that this Pokémon isn't going to unleash this Dynamax power. But at the same time, it doesn't feel cheap."

While some fans have expressed concern that the Dynamax mechanic might be overpowered in its ability to change the course of matches, by installing a three-turn limit for the transformation, Game Freak thinks it has struck the right balance. "For a long time, we were going back and forth between three turns and two turns," Ohmori says. "It sounds like a small difference, but it's a huge thing we had to work with the balance. Also, tweaking the strength of the moves. Just working with the battle design staff to get that balance right. It took a very long time."

In addition, if a trainer Dynamaxes a Pokémon, it tips off their opponent as to what's coming, allowing them to prepare for the approaching storm. "Technically you can switch out your Pokémon after you've Dynamaxed or just defend, but since that's a waste of the Dynamax, the expectation is that you're going to attack to take advantage of that power," Ohmori says. "That allows your opponent to read what you're going to do, so that gives a little bit of balance there."

Dynamax is sure to play a massive role in Pokémon Sword and Shield, but it's not the only way Pokémon can grow exponentially during battle. Every Pokémon can use Dynamax to power up, but a certain subset can take the concept further through a special variation called Gigantamax. Much like Dynamax, this causes the Pokémon to rapidly grow in size. However, it's not simply a power boost. In addition to visually changing the Gigantamaxed Pokémon beyond what Dynamax does, this new form grants different attributes. This means that for some Pokémon that have the ability to use both Gigantamax and Dynamax, the trainer must have the awareness to correctly determine which transformation to use for their current battle situation.

These transformations are more than just gameplay mechanics in Sword and Shield. In fact, Professor Magnolia, the person who gives you your starter Pokémon at the beginning of the game, is specialized in researching the Dynamax phenomenon in the Galar region. These transformations are sure to be centerpieces of not just the gameplay, but the narrative as well.

"The lore of the land is that the Galar region has this sort of mysterious energy that can power up things and make them massive, and we express that through the battle system; when they get bigger, they become stronger," Iwao says.

HOW DIFFERENT ARE SWORD AND SHIELD?

Pokémon games have traditionally released in pairs, with the titles featuring some different Pokémon and other smaller differences. For example, in Sun and Moon, the day and night cycles were reversed, affecting certain items and encounters during different parts of the cycle. Pokémon Sword and Shield carry on the tradition of certain Pokémon being exclusive to each version, but based on which version you get, the gym leaders are also affected.

According to director Shigeru Ohmori, the gyms are split into a system resembling major and minor sports leagues. "There are 18 different types of gyms in the story, and depending on the version, which gyms are in the minor league and which gyms are in the major league are different," he says. "For example, in Sword, the fighting-type gym will be in the major league, but in Shield, the ghost-type. The idea is that every year, the Galar region is playing and which gyms make it into the minor league versus the major league changes."

GOING WILD

While Dynamax is something Game Freak says wouldn't be possible on older hardware, the new Wild Area brings several technological advancements together into a vast expanse within the Galar region – a wide-open space where players can roam freely and catch Pokémon. However, it combines both synchronous and asynchronous connections to other players to populate the area with trainers from both online and local sessions.

In addition, players can meet up to trade, battle, or cooperate in the aforementioned Max Raid Battles, all of which is seamlessly autosaved as you play. "We're only able to do this because we've figured out all these technologies and figured out how to make it work, making sure we can have this kind of online matchmaking happen in the background while you're walking around and not interrupt the player," Masuda says. "Traditionally when the trade would happen, you'd have a hard save screen where you'd stop right there and save the game, but we've finally made a way to make saving happen in the background seamlessly without data being corrupted. Even though it looks like a super simple feature, it's actually been a lot of work behind getting it to actually work in the game."

The Wild Area also plays host to Pokémon Camps, another new feature in Pokémon Sword and Shield. As players roam the expanse of the Wild Area, they can set up camps for them and their Pokémon. Once in a camp, you can let your party of six Pokémon out to play. In addition to interacting with the Pokémon directly through throwing balls for them to fetch or brushing them, you can also watch them interact with each other.

You can also cook for yourself and your Pokémon. Based on the ingredients you use and how good you are at the cooking minigame, you can make different versions of curry with rice. Other players can join you in camp to help you cook and eat with you. Game Freak teases that eating with other trainers can have definite benefits.

THE COST OF ADVANCEMENT

The myriad advancements of Pokémon Sword and Shield are exciting, but a few months ago, the games made headlines for what's not going to be in them. During E3 in June, Masuda stated that not every Pokémon from the past will be able to be imported into Sword and Shield. This caused many members of the community to express their disappointment that their favorite Pokémon might be left out from the first all-new generation to appear on consoles.

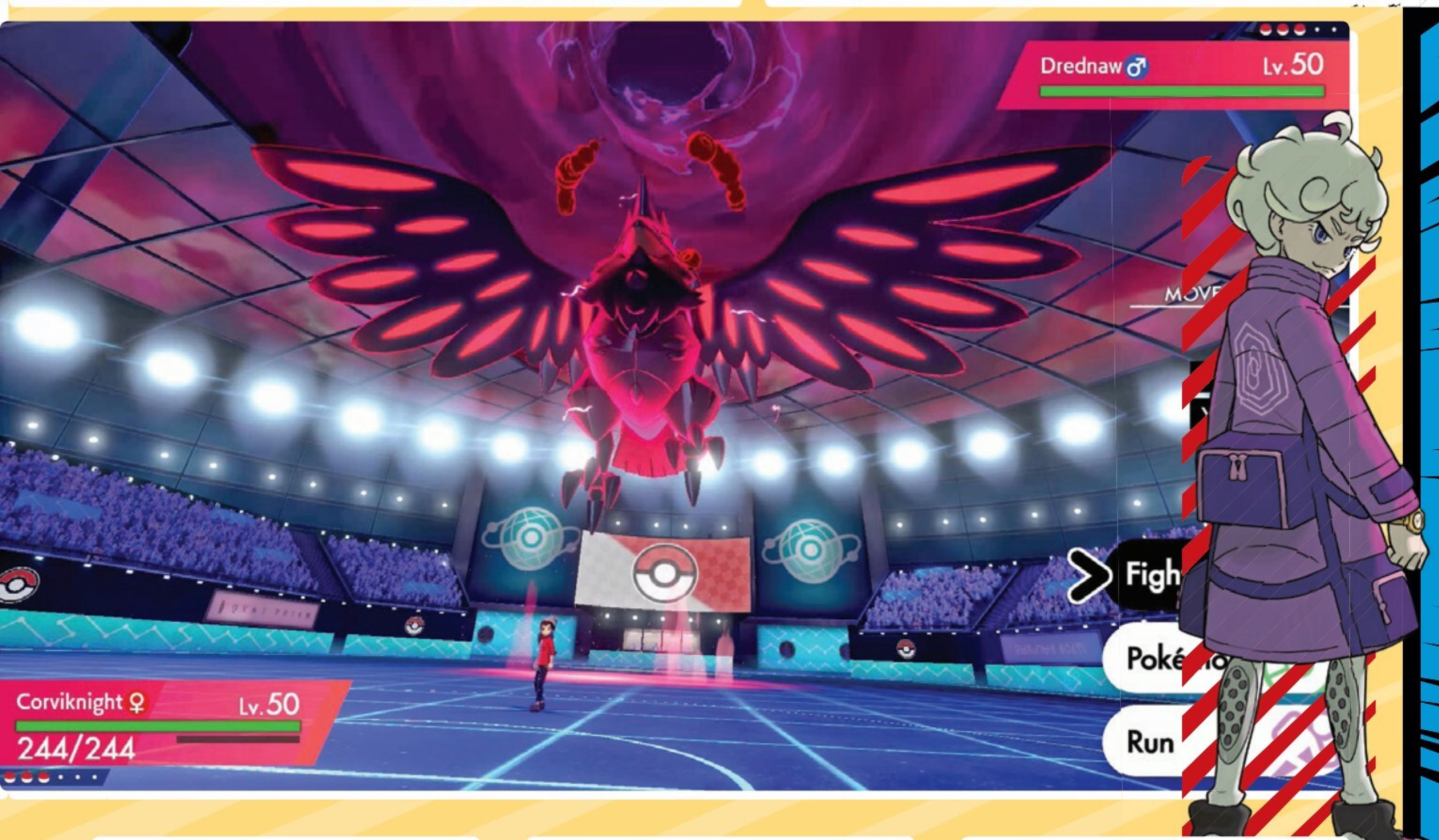
When I ask Masuda about the Pokémon not making the journey to the Galar region for Pokémon Sword and Shield, he says having so many Pokémon with each passing generation has become nearly unmanageable if the team wants to continue implementing new features.

"Up until now, we've been proud we've been able to include so many Pokémon in the games, but as a result of that, there's actually been quite a few features or gameplay ideas that we've had to abandon in the past," he says. "Going forward, thinking about the future of Pokémon, we want to prioritize all those new gameplay ideas, and want to challenge ourselves at Game Freak to create new ways to enjoy the game. That's really what drove the decision for this new direction."

While he won't elaborate on how many or which ones didn't make the cut, Masuda says the decision was a result of collaborative talks with Nintendo and The Pokémon Company. According to the producer, the decisions surrounding this move weren't

Sobble ♀
Lv.50
165/165

Grookey ♂
Lv.50
165/165



easy. "A wide variety of discussions happened; it's not just one kind of criteria for deciding the Pokémon are going to appear in the games, but a lot of different reasons, a lot of different directions, a lot of debate over which ones would be the best in the game," Masuda says. "I think one example of that is figuring out the Pokémon that would make sense for the setting of the game the most; these Pokémon look like they could live in the Galar region. We really spent a lot of effort deciding which would best fit the setting of the adventure and the features that we wanted to implement. I think players will be satisfied. There's quite a few Pokémon that you'll encounter in the Galar region Pokédex, so I think players will have fun seeing all the Pokémon."

While it's disappointing to be potentially unable to import your favorite Pokémon from a past game, there is an additional silver lining outside of the new features this enables Game Freak to implement going forward.

When I ask Masuda if the cut Pokémon will return in the future, he leaves little doubt. "Definitely," he says. "You can look forward to seeing Pokémon that don't appear in these games appearing in different regions in future games. I think Pokémon Home, for a lot of players, will serve as a launching pad to gather them all there and then embark on future adventures."

THE ULTIMATE POKÉMON GAME

On the surface, Pokémon Sword and Shield may look like just an upgraded version of the mainline Pokémon games to this point, but several changes and upgrades have helped Game Freak come closer to realizing its mission of creating the best Pokémon game to date. With improved hardware, a fully realized region to explore, and exciting new mechanics and ways to battle – not to mention an entire new generation of Pokémon to encounter, catch, and battle – Pokémon Sword and Shield certainly has the potential to deliver on Game Freak's lofty ambitions. Now, with just a month left before the games are out in the wild, players don't have long before they'll know if the long-requested leap to consoles was worth the wait. ◆

For more on Pokémon Sword and Shield, head to gameinformer.com/pokemon all month for exclusive interviews and features

Keeping It Real

» **Platform**
PS4 • PC

» **Style**
1- Player Action

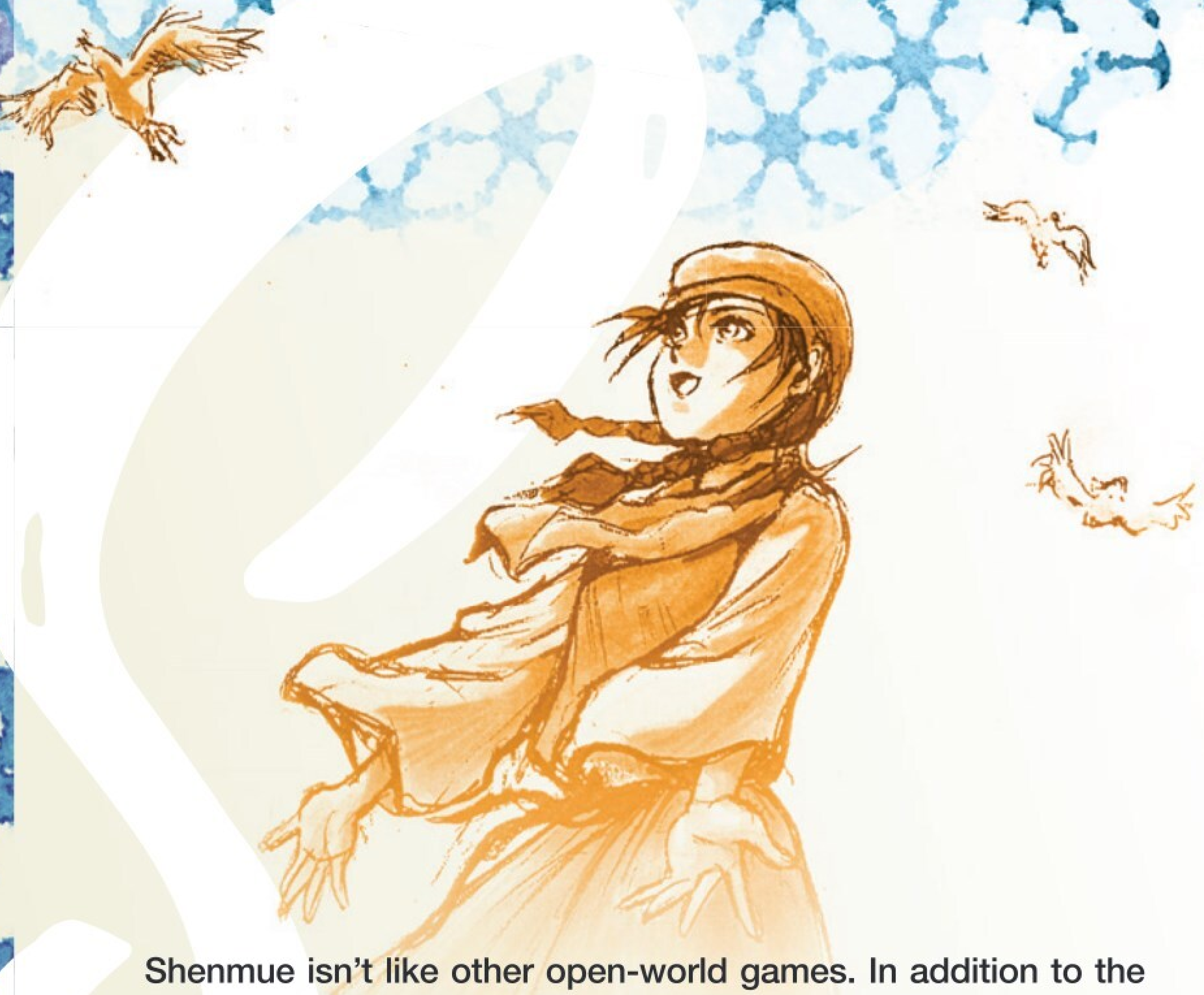
» **Publisher**
Deep Silver

» **Developer**
Ys Net

» **Release**
November 19

A peek inside the bizarre development of Shenmue III

by Ben Reeves



Shenmue isn't like other open-world games. In addition to the traditional fast-paced fistfights, the series gamifies some of the most prosaic moments from everyday life. While most games offer players a sense of freedom, Shenmue's freedoms extend to opening silverware drawers, feeding stray cats, and collecting toys from capsule vending machines.

Shenmue is often derided for its plodding narrative, goofy characters, and unusual attention to detail, and yet fans have been eagerly awaiting the next entry for almost two decades. Shenmue is weird, but that weirdness has earned it a legion of fans who ponied up more than six million dollars through Kickstarter to revive the brand. In order to explore what makes this franchise tick, we traveled to Ys Net's offices in Japan for an exclusive demo and a peek into the mind of creator Yu Suzuki.

VIRTUA RPG

Shenmue was supposed to save Sega. By the late-'90s, Sega was in decline. The company's Saturn console had failed to gain traction, and the publisher had lost much of the mindshare it had gained during the Genesis era. Sega was banking big on its new Dreamcast console, but it needed premium, big-budget software to drive players to the new hardware. Sega turned to Yu Suzuki and Shenmue.

Today, Suzuki is widely regarded as a legend of Japanese game design. As one of Sega's star developers for over 26 years, Suzuki produced a string of arcade hits like Hang-On, Space Harrier, and After Burner. One of Suzuki's biggest successes, Virtua Fighter, helped pioneer 3D graphics and briefly gave fighting-game giants like Street Fighter and Mortal Kombat a run for their money.

In 2011, after more than a quarter century with Sega, Suzuki left the company to form his own studio: Ys Net. This studio's offices are a simple collection of rooms tucked into a nondescript building in the middle of Tokyo's urban jungle. We arrived at Ys Net's front doors around noon – two hours late for our appointment. The day before, a typhoon had torn through Tokyo, completely destroying the city's public-transportation timetables. Fortunately, Suzuki was three hours late. When the designer finally arrived to his nearly empty office, he offered a weak smile and a bow. He was eager to get back on schedule, but he was also excited to share his inspirations for the original Shenmue.

Back in the mid-'90s, Sega wanted Suzuki to take Virtua Fighter and spin it off into something new – something like an RPG. Suzuki had been waiting for an opportunity like this. As a young programmer, he was mesmerized by Apple II RPGs like Ultima and Wizardry. He wanted to take some of the concepts featured in those early releases and expand them into a modern game. He rushed home and began jotting down ideas for his own epic RPG narrative about a boy on a quest to avenge his father's death.

Before long, a small team of Sega employees was helping Suzuki prototype this new RPG for the Saturn. The game's early working title was The Legend of Akira, named after one of Virtua Fighter's mainstays, but as development progressed, the title evolved into an identity of its own. Suzuki renamed the game Shenmue, a Japanese word meaning spirit tree.

Originally pitched as an RPG, Shenmue was wildly experimental and combined 3D fighting elements with adventure game-like information gathering and a finely detailed town that players could explore at their own pace. In many ways, Shenmue was ahead of its time as it experimented with several open-world fundamentals almost two years before Grand Theft Auto III would codify and popularize the genre.

"Shenmue was really one of the first open-world games," says Suzuki. "After Shenmue there were a lot of other open-world games. It's become one of the biggest genres, and I'm very happy to know that I created the original, which sort of triggered that kind of trend of open world."

In 1999, the term open world hadn't been coined, so Suzuki described Shenmue as a F.R.E.E. game – an acronym meaning Full Reactive Eyes Entertainment. This strange word jumble was Suzuki's way of letting players know that they were free to interact with anything they saw in Shenmue's environments, and its world would react to them. Players could open any drawer in Ryo's house and examine its contents, chitchat with every person in town, and waste days playing old Sega games in the arcade. Shenmue's attention to detail was painstaking. Suzuki had determined the blood type for all of Shenmue's nearly 250 NPCs, and the game's weather system was based on real-world data from Japan in the '80s. Suzuki had created a game unlike anything else on the market.

All those small details came with a cost. Shenmue's development had stretched on for six years and its budget had ballooned to almost 50 million dollars, making it the most expensive game Sega ever produced. When it released in December of 1999, Shenmue received generally positive critical reviews, but it was not the blockbuster Sega hoped for. After the release of Shenmue II in 2001, the publisher was hesitant to commit to another entry. Suzuki tried to keep the series alive by prototyping a Shenmue MMO, but that never saw the light of day. Series' star Ryo made a few cameos in games like Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing, but as time wore on, fans began to fear that they may never see a resolution to Shenmue II's cliffhanger ending.

But that wasn't the end of the story. As luck would have it, Suzuki would get another opportunity to continue his epic tale, and that chance came more than a decade later from halfway around the world.

GETTING A KICKSTART

Ryan Payton has covered a lot of ground in the games industry over the years. He worked his way up the ladder at Kojima Productions to become an assistant producer on Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots, then moved to 343 Industries to be a creative director on Halo 4, before finally founding his own studio, Camouflaj, where he is currently working on Iron Man VR. Before any of that, Payton was a Shenmue fan.

"I imported the Japanese version and played it as a college student, and I actually learned a lot of Japanese from it," says Payton, who is now project advisor on Shenmue III. "I was always really bothered by the fact that Yu Suzuki had this incredible saga of games he wanted to tell, and how that was seemingly ending with Shenmue II. I always felt, in the back of my mind, that if I ever had the opportunity to help Yu Suzuki I would, because in a lot of ways he was a god of the Japanese games industry."

By 2011, Payton gained the means and the knowledge to help when he raised $500,000 dollars on Kickstarter to fund development of an episodic stealth series called République. Payton's experience on Kickstarter was so positive that he immediately thought that the service could be used to fund another Shenmue game. Thanks to the help of Sony's Mark Cerny, Payton was able to connect with Suzuki and pitch him the idea of using Kickstarter to fund the development of Shenmue III.

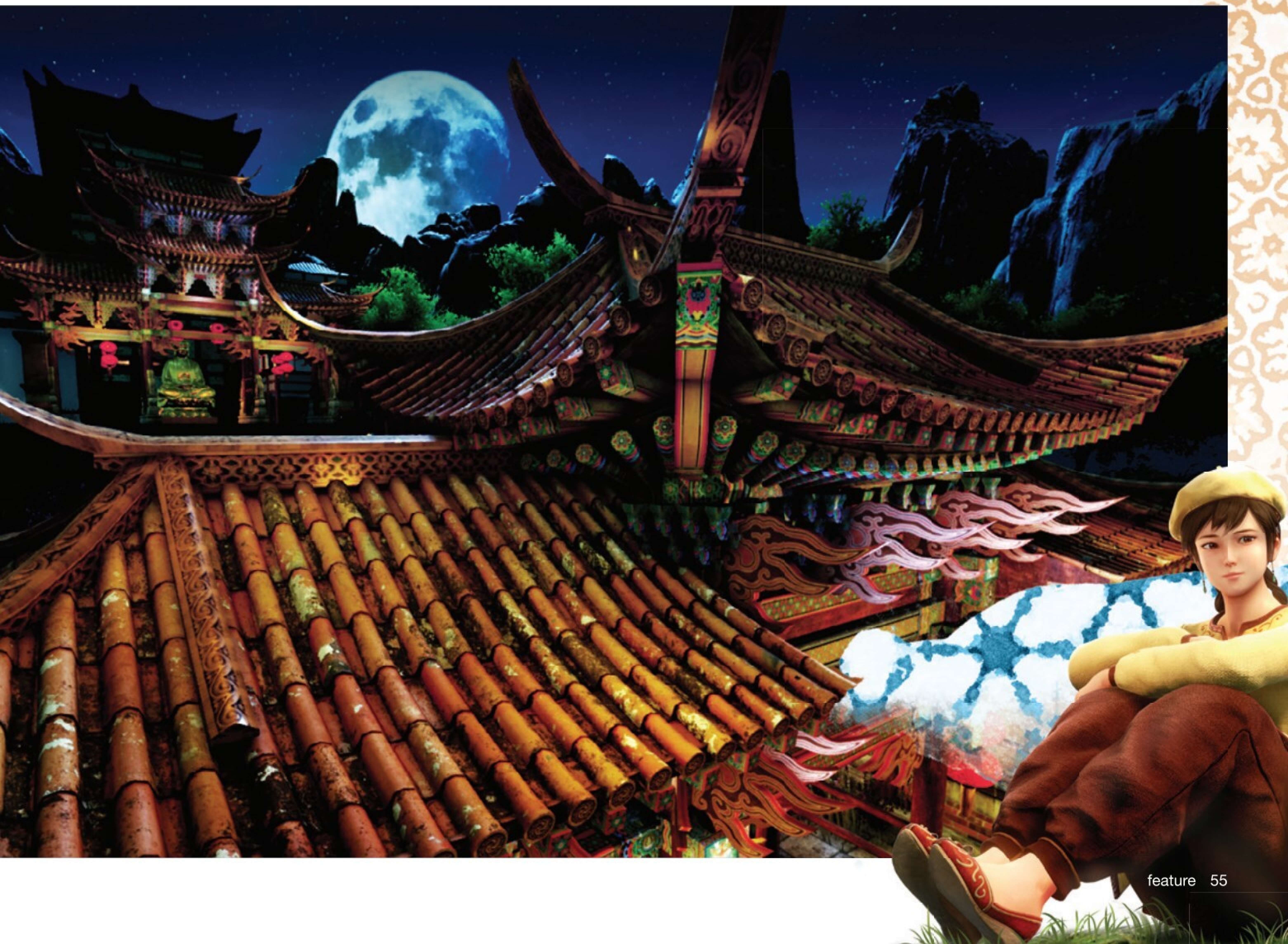
As we sit around the tiny, austere conference table at Ys Net's offices, Suzuki recounts those early discussions and the emotional journey he took while deciding to bring Shenmue to Kickstarter. "Of course, I was thinking really deeply," he says. "I knew it could be hard, but the most important thing for me is that I make this game for the fans, for those who are willing to support us."

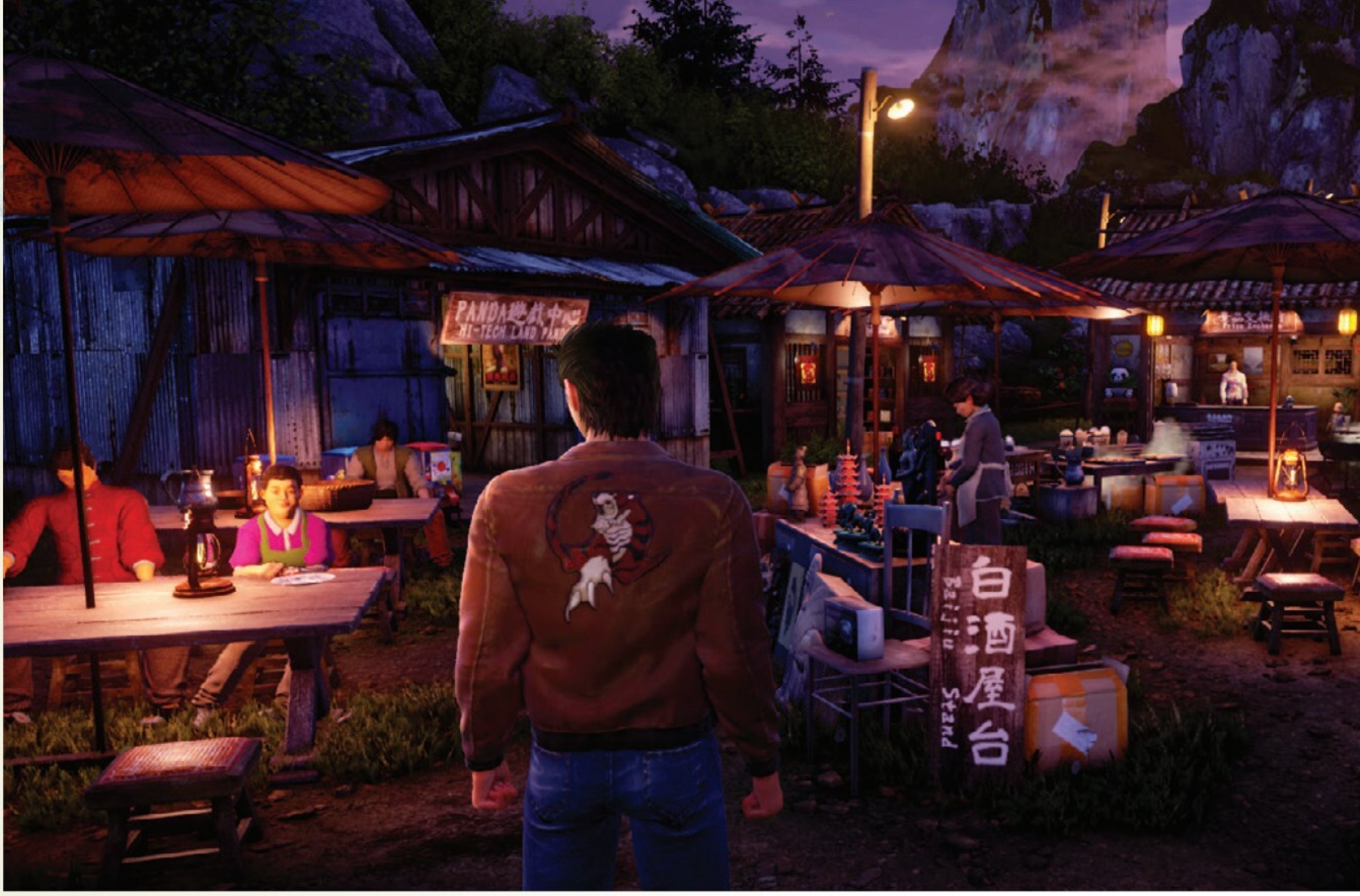
Before the Kickstarter, Suzuki says he briefly considered scaling back the scope of the project to create a simpler, Telltale-style adventure game that would easily allow fans to experience the end of the story. In the end, Suzuki ultimately felt that fans deserved a full Shenmue experience. By early 2015, the pieces were falling into place. Sega licensed the property to Suzuki, and Sony was interested in supporting the designer by promoting his Kickstarter during its E3 presentation.

After the announcement, more than 60,000 fans flocked to that Kickstarter project, pledging more than six million dollars. Suzuki holds up the Guinness World Record he earned for fastest growing crowdfunding campaign. It's clear that he is proud of Shenmue's Kickstarter success, and while six million dollars was a significant boost to Suzuki's moral, it was still a pittance compared to Shenmue's previous budgets.

"Because I'm a fan, I remember reading about the immense budget of Shenmue and how that might have led to the franchise's long-standing hibernation," says Payton. "I was really worried about how Yu Suzuki was going to be managing the budget of Shenmue III, and maybe unfairly. He has really done an incredible job building a really big game with a relatively small budget. But again, Yu Suzuki is a visionary, and he's very stubborn. He does not want to compromise."

"In the previous Shenmue games I had a bigger team and because those team members kept bringing new ideas to the game, I had to continually change or correct things," adds Suzuki. "There were many redos – we were doing things again and again and again. For Shenmue III, I'm more involved directly in the details and all the elements of the game, so there is much less to redo. As a result, the effectiveness of development is much higher than the originals."





STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

It's 7:30 p.m. in Tokyo, and the weather is sweltering. We're stuck in traffic on the way from Ys Net's offices in Shinagawa City to a dinner reservation in Yokahoma's Chinatown. Tokyo's traffic system is still reeling from the typhoon, and our 30-minute commute has turned into a 2.5-hour crawl across the Yokohama Bay Bridge. Hot and frustrated, Yu Suzuki pulls out his phone and begins watching an episode of the NBC crime thriller *The Blacklist*. Suzuki is a big fan; he thinks the show is incredibly well made. Later on, we all watch the first episode of *Fuller House* and laugh about the absurdity of being trapping in a car with a legendary Japanese developer while watching American sitcoms. "*Full House* is the foundation of Shenmue," jokes Suzuki.

The car ride is surreal, but it's another opportunity to pick Suzuki's brain. It turns out he finds a lot of inspiration for his games while watching television and movies. During the creation of the original Shenmue, Suzuki watched one movie a day, on average, for over two years. He cites films like *Casablanca* and *My Neighbor Totoro* as inspirations, not specifically for their story, but for what they taught him about storytelling and character development. Shenmue III is – after all – largely a character study.

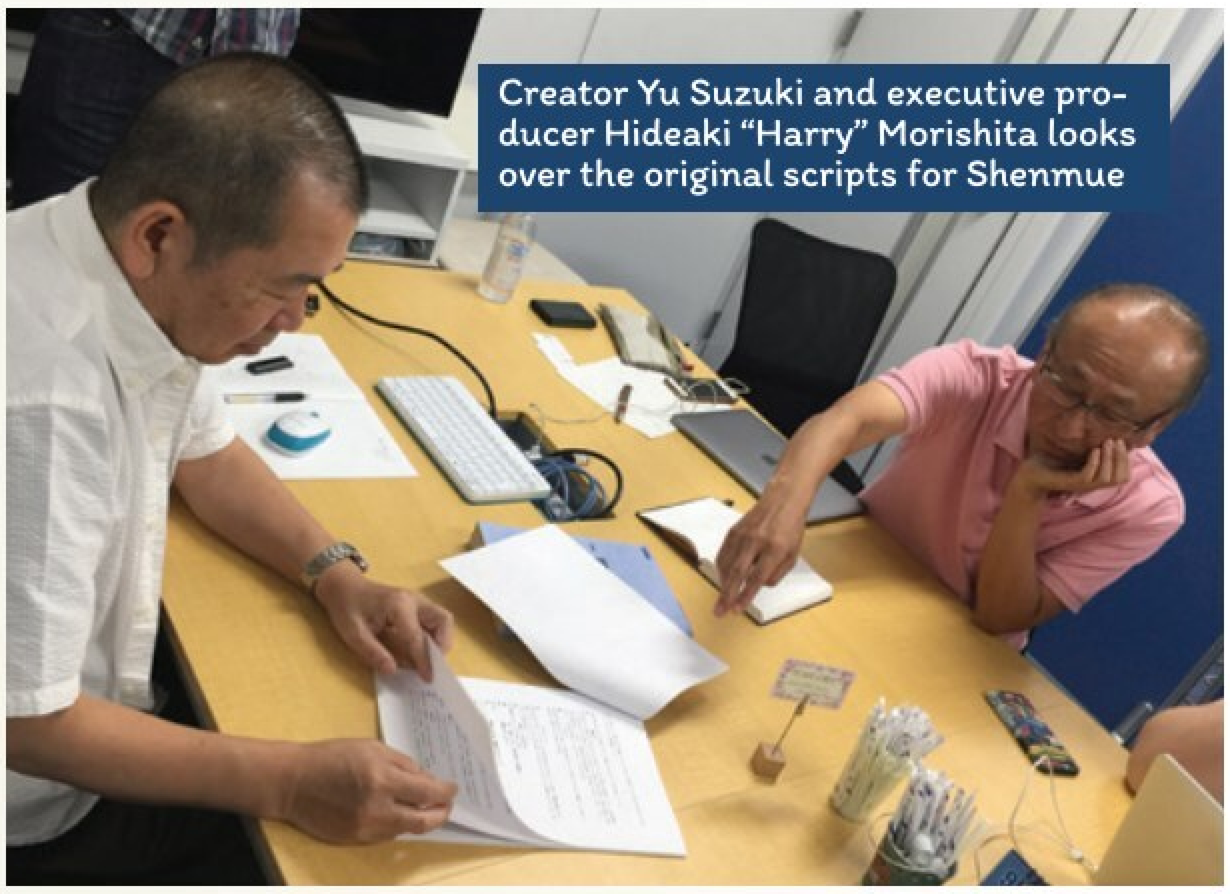
Shenmue tells the story of Ryo Hazuki, a stoic young man whose father is murdered before his eyes by a high-ranking member of a Chinese cartel – a man named Lan Di. Wracked with grief, Ryo sets off on a one-man quest to track down Lan Di and avenge his father. This quest takes Ryo out of his small town in Japan and into the heart of mainland China.

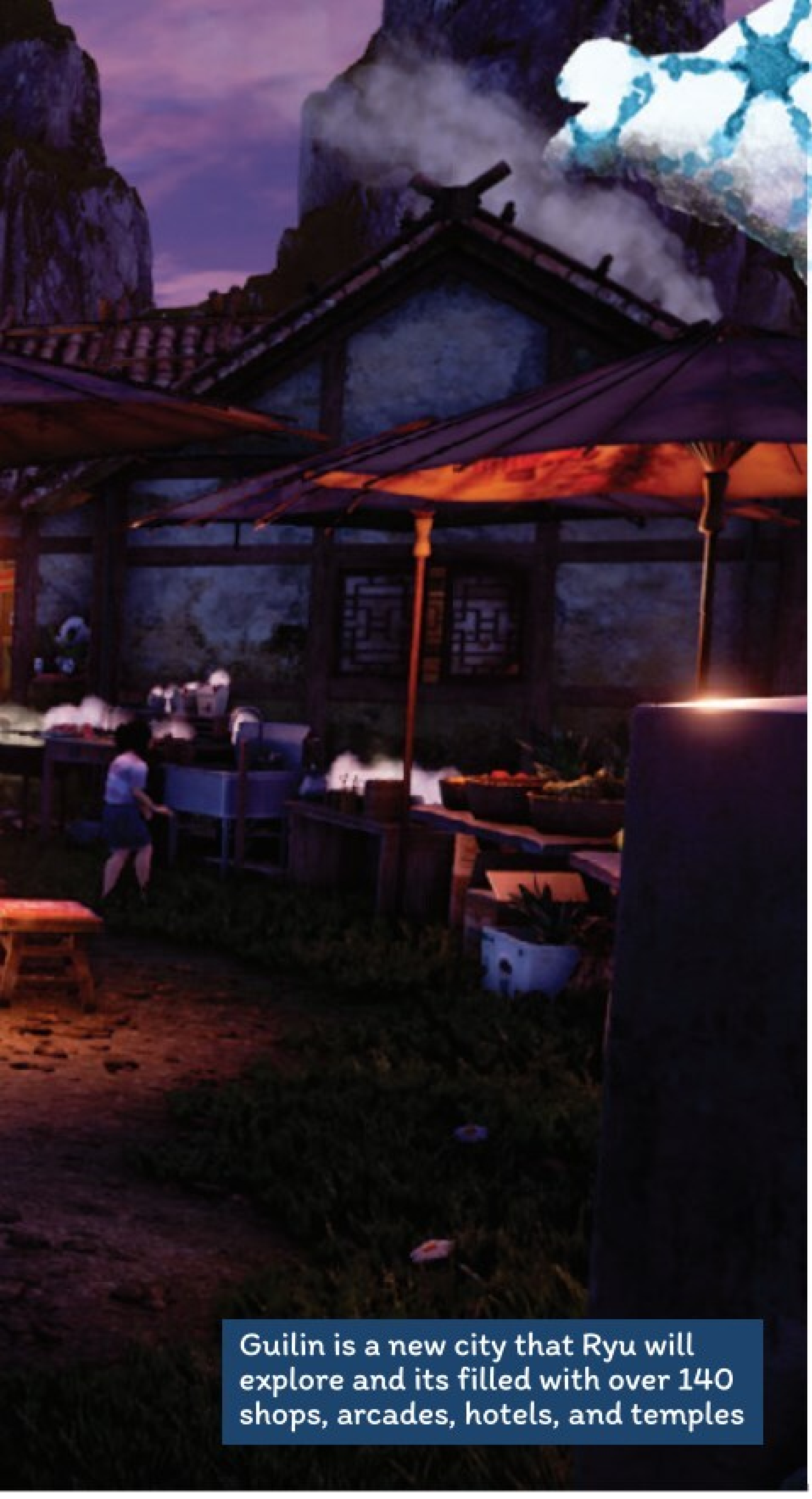
Shenmue III picks up the story after Ryo has meet a mysterious young woman named Shenhua Ling. Shenhua's fate is similar to Ryo's in that her father has been kidnapped by the same criminal organization that employees Lan Di. The two join forces, track down Shenhua's father, and get to the bottom of this mystery together.

"Ryo will discover that, somewhere in the past, his father visited Shenhua's village and that there are some secrets there," says Suzuki. "Ryo's father was hunting for something there. That's another layer of the mystery: How was his father involved with Lan Di?"

We catch up with Ryo after he travels to a large riverside village known as Guilin. This idyllic town is full of classic-looking temples and sloping, tiled roofs. Suzuki says this village is about 40 percent of the way into the main storyline and that it holds several important clues that will help Ryo track down Lan Di.

The development team took several trips to Tokyo's chinatown for inspiration while building Shenmue III's world


Creator Yu Suzuki and executive producer Hideaki "Harry" Morishita looks over the original scripts for Shenmue



Guilin is a new city that Ryu will explore and its filled with over 140 shops, arcades, hotels, and temples

> "It's much more fun to play and more approachable, even if you don't have much skill.
>
> – Yu Suzuki

As with the previous Shenmue games, players can unravel this main mystery at their own pace, and there are plenty of activities to distract them while they're at it. The town of Guilin is dense with over 140 shops, arcades, hotels, and temples. Players can spend days gambling on minigames such as the pachinko-esque Lucky Hit, get a part-time job driving a forklift, fish along the riverfront, collect herbs, and hunt for hidden in-game collectibles.

As Ryo wanders Guilin's streets, we take in the local city life. Steam pours off the grills of a local food vendor as a group of monks practice their martial arts in a nearby courtyard. We walk past a couple and listen to them bicker about the size of their hotel room. The husband promises to buy his wife anything she wants from the market. Ryo peeks through the windows of a nearby apartment building and catches a man flexing in the mirror. Suzuki tells us that this character is actually modeled after a Kickstarter backer. Finally, at the end of the block, Ryo enters a local arcade where he can kill time by playing a variety of mechanical amusements and digital arcade games. One boxing game invites Ryo to test his might by punching padded targets. At the other end of the room is a parody of Virtua Fighter staring cutesy birds, called Chobu-chan.

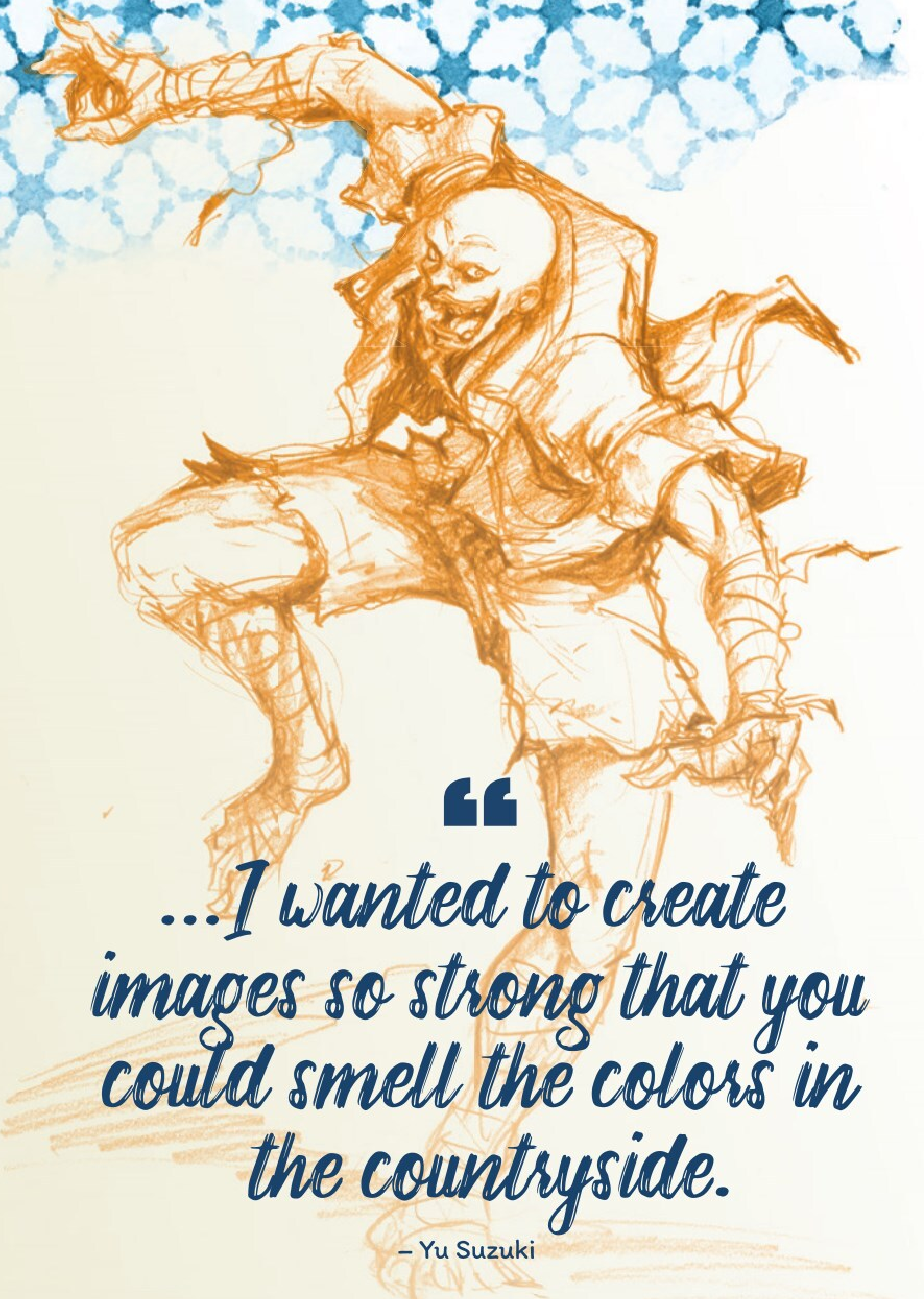
Naturally Ryo's daily errands are occasionally interrupted by a quick-time action sequence or an all-out bar brawl. Shenmue's original combat system was based on Virtua Fighter and felt a little complex to those who didn't play a lot of fighting games. Shenmue III's combat, on the other hand, has been completely reworked and feels less rigid than previous incarnations.

"We rebuilt Shenmue III's combat from scratch," says Suzuki. "It's much more fun to play and more approachable, even if you don't have much skill. We're using some A.I. elements so even if you're just randomly pushing buttons something meaningful will happen."

Without any practice we jumped into the game and worked our way up a tournament ladder with ease. Our first opponent is a small, young man with a shaved head. He comes out strong with a flurry of punches, but we dodge to the side and unleash a combo of our own against his exposed side and he crumples to the floor. Ryo's movements feel natural and responsive, and we have no problem stringing together simple combos from a mix of light and heavy attacks.

Our second opponent is an older gentleman with a pompadour and a pencil-thin mustache. He's a bit more imposing than our first match-up. Fortunately, Ryo has a few more tricks up his sleeve. In addition to traditional combos, Ryo has access to a number of prebuilt attacks that can be performed with the tap of the right bumper. Players can choose which attack is set to the combo button. These attacks range from grappling to high-flying spin kicks, but they almost always do a great deal of damage. We use a pre-built combo that ends with a wicked roundhouse to break through our opponent's defenses and send him to his knees.

After a few more matches, Ryo starts to run out of steam. Thankfully, using a shortcut on the d-pad, we're able to consume various foods, which restore a bit of Ryo's health mid-battle. Naturally, Ryo can also expand his move set and strengthen his basic attacks by training at a kwoon or participating in local tournaments. While it remains to be seen if Shenmue's story will be worth the wait, we walk away from our demo feeling better knowing that Shenmue's action has never felt better.



> “…I wanted to create images so strong that you could smell the colors in the countryside.
>
> – Yu Suzuki

BETWEEN TRUTH AND A LIE

“To be honest I don't play many other games,” confides Suzuki before dinner. “If you say you like Chinese food, you probably mean that you like to eat Chinese food, but what I like is the cooking of the food, not the eating. In most cases in the gaming industry, the guys who create the games also like playing games. But in my case, I really just love to create, so the way I develop is very different from ordinary game developers.”

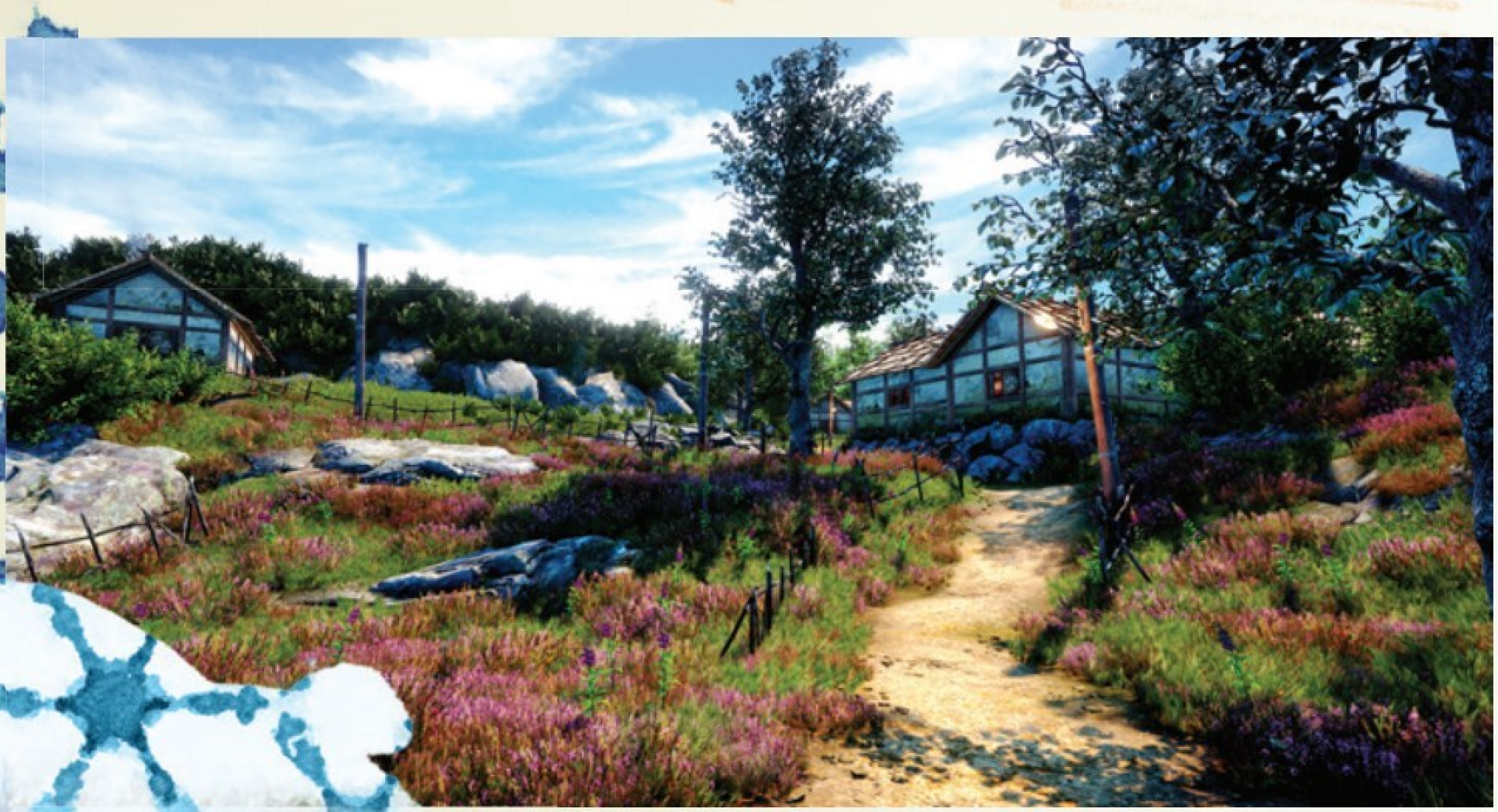
Suzuki is referring to his attention to mundane details. Shenmue’s specialty is its focus on the minutia of daily life. Players are free to get lost in Ryo’s artificial world – to collect meaningless figurines and chug soda. Fans appreciate these unusual aspects of Shenmue, not because they fill some arbitrary in-game checklist or bring them closer to the game’s credits, but because these tiny details conjure a deeper sense of verisimilitude. Shenmue’s world isn’t real, but it feels real.

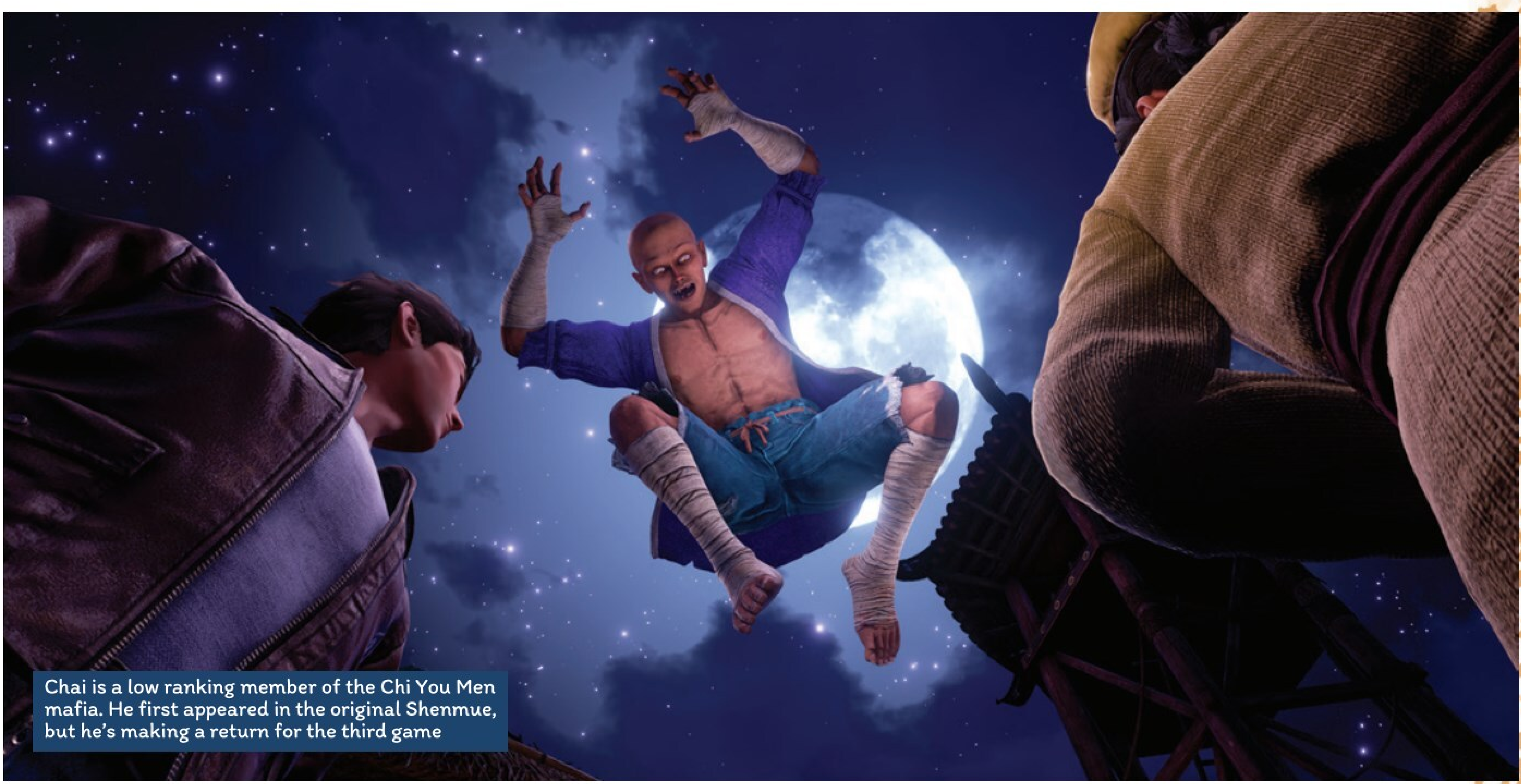
“For Shenmue III, I wanted to create images so strong that you could smell the colors in the countryside,” says Suzuki. “For me it’s very important to create those images where you can feel the moisture or humidity. If possible, I wanted to create a sense of smell in the game.”

As if highlighting this fact, one of the first things Suzuki showed us during our Shenmue III demo were its weather effects. The designer notes how rain creates tiny beads of moisture on Ryo’s jacket. A weather system might seem fairly standard for a modern open-world game, but these little details excite Suzuki. Later on, while exploring Ryo’s hotel room, Suzuki points out that players can make international phone calls to characters from the first two Shenmue games. Ryo can also open every drawer in his room and examine knickknacks that serve no purpose to the story. And, when players want to add something to Ryo’s inventory, the character must pick up each object individually and physically move them with his hands.

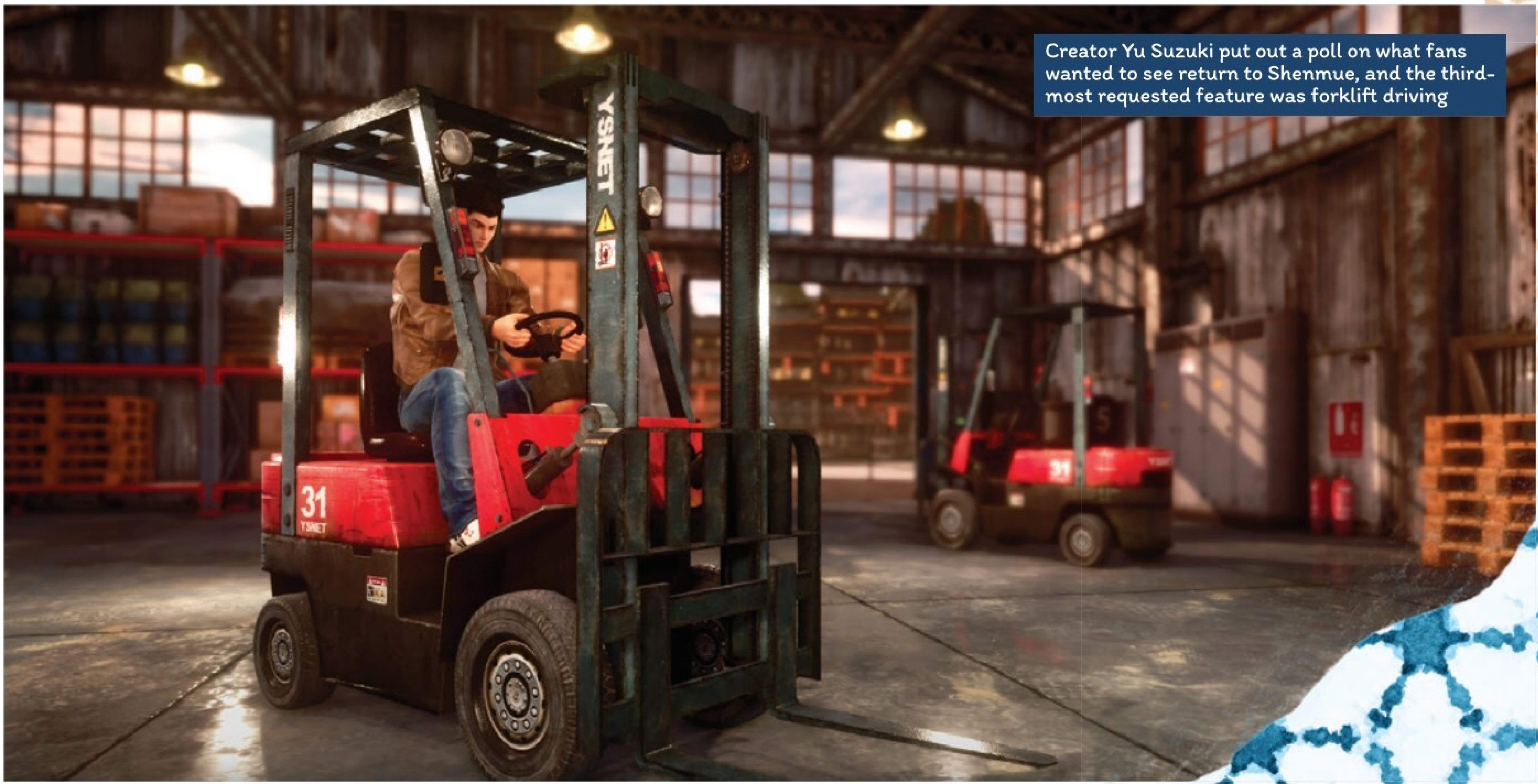
These little details might add to Shenmue’s sense of realism, but they are also the insufficient details that most designers sacrifice to speed up the action. Suzuki, on the other hand, doesn’t see how you could make a game any other way.

“In the real world, if you see some door and you want to open it, you open it. In the real world, you can touch and move everything.” says Suzuki. “Because I don’t play other games, I think it’s very natural to interact with everything … The keyword I often use is reality. Shenmue isn’t necessarily true to reality, but it is a reality you can trust as if almost real. That's what I consider entertainment. Somewhere between true and false is a reality that we’re trying to hit. People may think that I'm trying to create something real, but it's not truly real; it’s a new reality that I'm creating.”



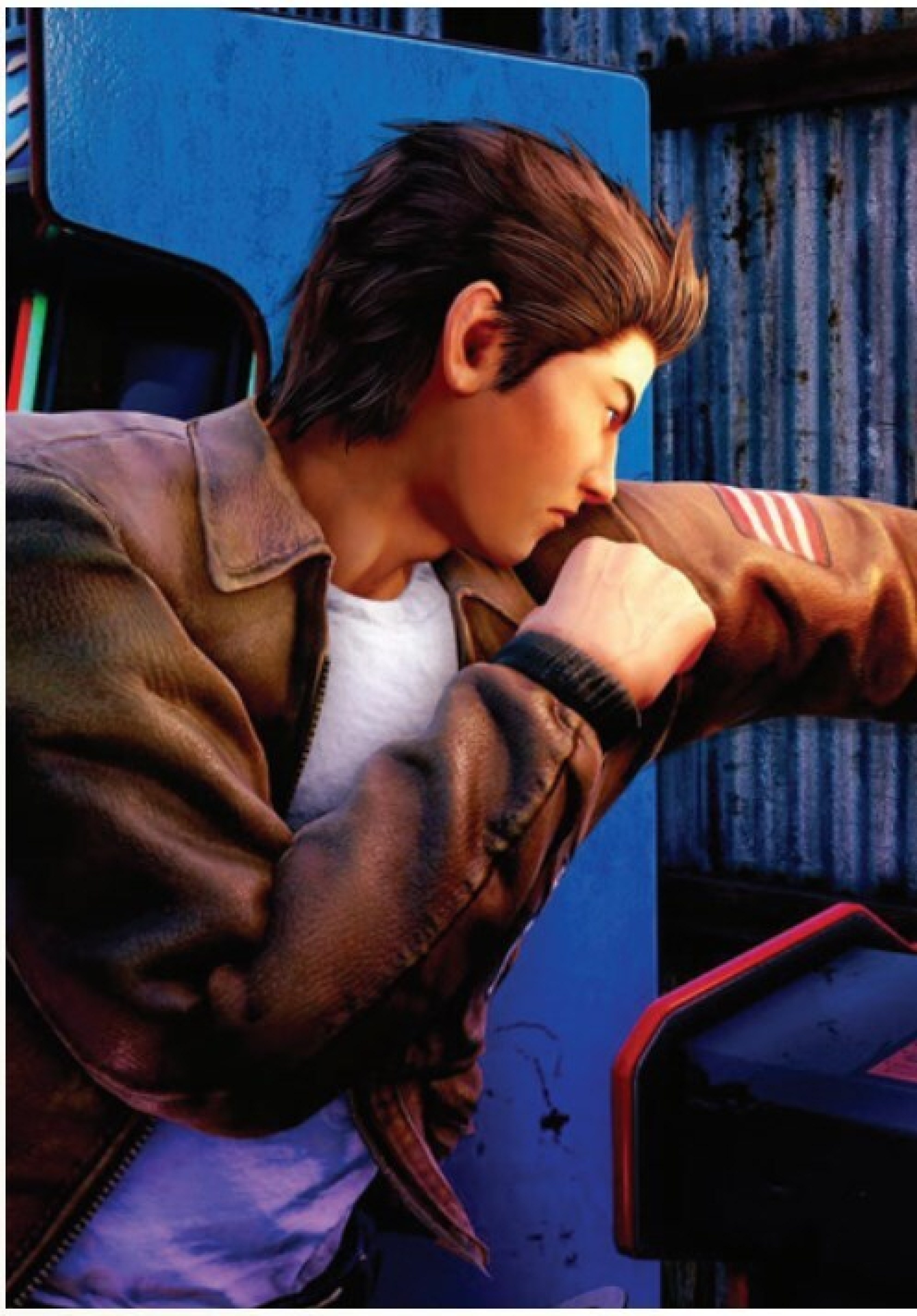


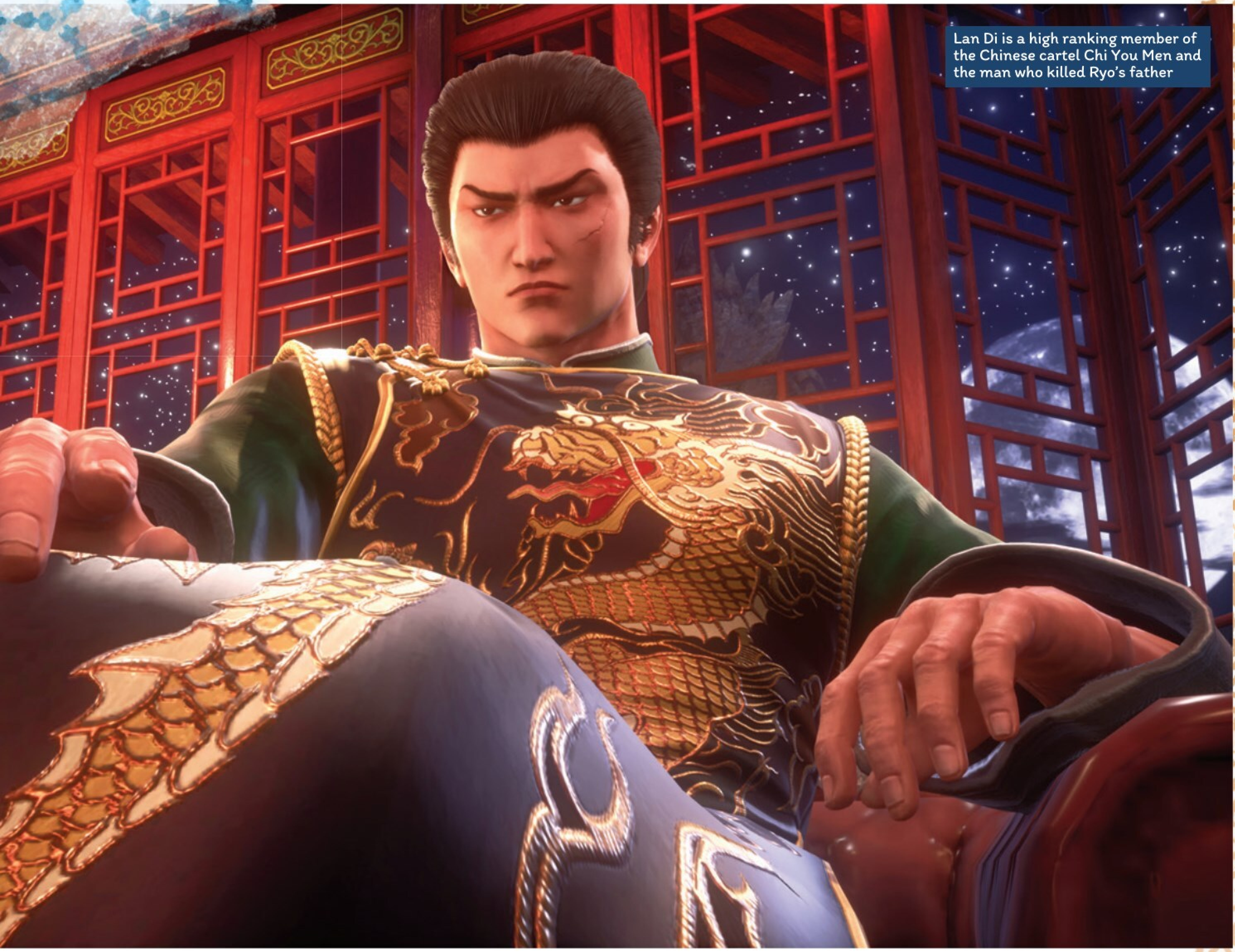
Chai is a low ranking member of the Chi You Men mafia. He first appeared in the original Shenmue, but he's making a return for the third game



Creator Yu Suzuki put out a poll on what fans wanted to see return to Shenmue, and the third-most requested feature was forklift driving

> “…Like a lot of great art, as time goes on, we're able to look back and recognize just how special Shenmue was.
>
> – Ryan Payton





Lan Di is a high ranking member of the Chinese cartel Chi You Men and the man who killed Ryo's father

A WAITING GAME

Yu Suzuki isn't a conventional game designer. Several times during our trip, Suzuki admitted that he doesn't enjoy playing video games. In fact, before working at Sega, Suzuki had never played a video game. Better still, the designer only accepted Sega's job offer because the company offered more vacation time than his other prospects. Orthodox or not, Suzuki is still a game designer who knows what he wants. He doesn't care how other developers make their games; he knows what kind of game he wants to make. And Shenmue is unflinching in that vision to give players a window into the life of Ryo Hazuki – both the action-packed highlights and the quiet, simple moments.

"I think Yu Suzuki was at peak auteur status when he built the original Shenmue," says Payton. "You could see him trying to innovate in so many areas – I think successfully in many of those areas. Whether it's the kind of open-world nature of the game, or the need to plot out your day, or the ability to interact with the world in unique ways, they all added to the overall feeling of simulation. I think it was a little bit confusing for players and for critics, but like a lot of great art, as time goes on, we're able to look back and recognize just how special Shenmue was."

With a relatively small budget, Suzuki looks to deliver another game that fits the mold he established 20 years ago. Shenmue III features a more refined graphics engine and some welcome improvements to the combat system, but the core experience remains full of the idiocrasies and daily distractions that Shenmue fans love. Yu Suzuki doesn't care how the industry has evolved over the last 20 years. He knows what he wants. Moreover, he knows what Shenmue fans want.

Near the end of our trip, after we'd trudged through Japan's Chinatown, Suzuki takes us to one of his favorite restaurants. We point at a picture of delicious-looking gyoza, but Suzuki waves us off and takes control of the menu. He's going to order for us. After all, Yu Suzuki is a man who knows what he wants. We don't eat gyoza that night, but the meal is incredible. ◆

Final Fantasy VII Remake

Old friends and new features

» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
March 3

Since the announcement of Final Fantasy VII Remake, its creators have been frank about their willingness to experiment – sometimes even with elements that were important parts of the original. That approach resulted in a new action-focused battle system, as well as an expanded story spread across across multiple full installments. However, familiar touchstones are also necessary to stay true to the spirit and story of the original adventure. With the new footage and information at Tokyo Game Show, Square Enix struck an encouraging balance between reliving the past and reinventing it.

The most surprising new reveal is a "classic" difficulty setting. For fans who aren't completely sold on the remake's real-time battle system, classic mode aims to recapture the feeling of more traditional turn-based encounters. Even though the heroes and enemies still move and attack in real-time, classic mode automates more of that process, so players can focus on selecting special actions. Normally, manually performing basic attacks gradually charges your ATB meter, and when it's full, you can choose to do special moves, cast spells, or use items. With classic mode enabled, you can take your hands off the controller and just watch the ATB meter charge as your characters attack, letting you jump in to you choose your other actions from a menu when the time is right.

We also saw Final Fantasy VII Remake's version of the summon system. In the original title, characters could equip multiple summon materia to call forth a variety of beasts for powerful (and elaborate) one-off attacks. Now, characters can only have one summon equipped at a time, leading to some strategy about which ones you want to bring along into different situations. To use the summons, you must first wait for the meter to fill – then the creature dramatically appears and remains on the battlefield to fight by your side. During a live demo, we saw Cloud (accompanied by Tifa and Aerith) call Ifrit to help defeat Aps – a familiar boss in the sewers of Midgar. As the summon pounded on Aps, Cloud was able to issue commands to Ifrit like any other party member, requesting specific moves from its fiery repertoire. Summons are only able to manifest for a limited time, though, and once the gauge depletes, they leave the battlefield with a bang by performing their specialty attacks. For example, before Ifrit disappeared, he cast Hellfire to engulf Aps in flame and win the battle.

Locked On
1178
Palm Strike
Attack
Commands Menu
Aerith 1211/1750 48
Cloud 723/2134 38
Tifa HP 1460/1921 MP 33
ATB
Limit

Overcharge
Attack
Commands Menu
Tifa 1462/1519 34
Cloud 753/1686 39
Barret HP 1935/1992 MP 31
ATB
Limit

The most mysterious and enticing tease involves a brand-new character – a man from SOLDIER who did not appear in the original game. He appears only briefly in a trailer, so this warrior's identity and the role he plays in the story is up for speculation. However, Square Enix also showed off several familiar faces in the same trailer, like Don Corneo, Jessie, and other members of Avalanche. The Turks (like Reno, Rude, and Tseng) also make appearances, dressed in their signature slick suits during cutscenes and as opponents in battle.

Square Enix also showed off another returning element from the original: the ridiculous squats minigame. It seems to be a pretty basic rhythm-driven affair, but more importantly, it also demonstrates that Final Fantasy VII Remake isn't all grim and gritty. It still has some of the goofy stuff that established such a unique tone back in 1997; it's hard to take Cloud too seriously when he's competing against bumbling musclemen to see who can perform the most squats.

Whether you're doing a bizarre minigame in a gym or fighting alongside a fire elemental, Final Fantasy VII Remake is poised to provide a broad range of experiences for fans new and old. While having a connection to the previous game is likely to enrich your appreciation of the remake, that nostalgia isn't required. Final Fantasy VII Remake may have roots in the past, but it doesn't seem bound by them in its pursuit of trying something new and exciting. » **Joe Juba**

Nioh 2

Deadly challenges with more satisfying moves

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1-Player Action
(1 to 3-Player Online)

» Publisher
Koei Tecmo, Sony

» Developer
Team Ninja

» Release
Early 2020

The first Nioh made a big impression on gamers with its cool samurai backdrop and unrelenting difficulty. Nioh 2 isn't changing up the formula; it stays true to the insurmountable challenge, but it is also leaning more into the yokai (Japanese spirit) elements for more memorable moves to defeat the larger-than-life bosses. While at Tokyo Game Show, I went hands-on with the game and attended a presentation to learn more about it. It quickly became my favorite game of the show.

Producer Fumihiko Yasuda confirmed that Nioh 2 is a prequel taking place slightly before the original, but is a completely standalone story. Set in the late 1500s, you play as your own customized character, who is part yokai. "The big historical storyline is going to be that [Toyotomi] Hideyoshi, one of the greatest Japanese warlords, was actually two people – that includes you and Toukichiro, and you two will be Hideyoshi together and that sort of ties into the core of the story," Yasuda explains. Toukichiro is another main character in the game, and Yasuda said he was based on a historical figure; connecting the dots, Hideyoshi at one point went by a similar name.

Outside of being one half of the man known as Japan's "second great unifier," you also are much more than just a samurai fighting evil this time around. You become a demon by darkness, thanks to your yokai ties. This means you can shift into a yokai form and have special attacks. In fact, any yokai you defeat drops a soul core, giving you the ability to equip one of their big moves.

Also new to Nioh 2 is a place called the Dark Realm, which is where yokai dwell. At certain points, yokai drag you down here as the Dark Realm enhances their powers. This brings out some of the tougher enemies, but defeating them often rewards you with high-quality items. In fact, some chests can't even be opened unless you take them down first.

While there's no easy mode, there are a few ways to get help. Just like the original, Nioh 2 has co-op, but this time it's expanding its real-time multiplayer to allow up to three players. You can also look to "Benevolent Graves." Once activated, these allow A.I. versions of human players to appear in your game for assistance. If you set one of these graves down, you can also have an A.I. version

of your character help out another random player.

I saw these promising features in action during my hands-on demo. Nioh 2 follows the same philosophy as its predecessor: Survey the area and defeat enemies to get better gear so you stand a better chance at whatever big bad is awaiting you at the end. Gear and weapons still show up cosmetically on your character, giving you a new look for every occasion.

After searching around in my demo I find the dual hatchets, a new weapon in the game, and they quickly become my go-to. They feel weightless and fast, but can also do a good amount of damage. Plus, some of the combos are just plain cool to see in action. A new yokai, similar to Kodama, is hidden in levels and offers support. In this case, if you find the adorable cat-like creature in a level, it will follow you around and regenerate your meter to activate yokai moves.

As the demo progresses, I slowly get back in my Nioh groove, defeating harder and harder enemies. Stances are still important, depending on how you want to play: high for offense, mid for defense, and low for dodging, and it still comes down to studying attack patterns and making sure you don't put yourself in a vulnerable position. Players of the first game know there's no worse feeling than running out of stamina and sitting there unable to move, seeing the incoming hit, and knowing there's nothing you can do about it. And sometimes you can do a lot right and still fail, as I see in my first big boss battle against a vicious horse-faced baddie with a big cleaver. His wide swings take up so much space that missing a dodge and getting swept up in a nasty combo is the easiest way to a game over screen, which happens three more times before the timed demo expires.

And yet, I can't wait to play more. The adrenaline rush of slowly figuring out how to take down a massive boss who initially wipes the floor with you is undeniable. Each death gets you a little closer to victory, as you learn the patterns, make better decisions, and ultimately land one of those counters or combos that stun an enemy. Nioh 2 doesn't reinvent the wheel, but throwing in some cool yokai moves to use against these menacing foes makes the victories all the sweeter.
» **Kimberley Wallace**

Planet Zoo

Taking a walk on the wild side

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Simulation

» Publisher
Frontier Developments

» Developer
Frontier Developments

» Release
November 5

With intricately detailed animals and seemingly endless customization options, Planet Zoo has wowed me since its initial reveal. That's why I jumped at the chance to get my hands on Frontier's fast-approaching sim. My demo drops me into a pre-constructed zoo. A quick flyover would have you believe it's running like a well-oiled machine, but upon closer inspection, the facility needs some work.

After unpausing the action and panning over the hordes of zoogoers, I notice a crowd making a break for it. While it initially looks like they're excited to get to the next exhibit, the developer guiding me on my tour tells me a crowd of running patrons means one thing: An animal is loose. Using a panel on the left-hand side of the screen, I view animal alerts. While a few different problems must be addressed, the most pressing issue involves a rhinoceros that has somehow escaped its enclosure. Using the staff menu, I hire some veterinarians and place them by the loose beast. They break out tranquilizer guns, put the rhino to sleep, and package him up in a giant box. The box moves to the creature's habitat, which is missing a wall – no wonder it got out! The rhino remains in the box until I let it out, giving me a chance to patch up the hole in the wall.

Heading to other parts of the zoo, I have less-pressing matters to attend to. The first stop is the springbok habitat, where the creatures are unhappy with the kind of terrain available to them; right now, they have a bunch of sand, rock, and soil, but not enough short and long grass. Thankfully, using the terrain tool, I can easily select the kind of grass I need and paint it in the exact area I want. The springboks are happy, but my work isn't finished.

Next up: The tapirs are bored, so I want to place some enrichment items to stimulate their brains. Enrichment items come in the forms of mud baths, balls for the animals to play with, climbing posts, and plenty more. However, it's a bit more difficult than simply throwing a bunch of giant soccer balls in the enclosure and calling it a day; you need to give the animals toys their species actually enjoy. Filtering on tapir, I see they enjoy things like beach balls, rubbing pads, and cardboard boxes, so I decide to solve two problems at once by placing these items in spots where patrons have a great view; people love watching animals interact and play with these objects. The tapirs are also in need of some shade, so I select trees regionally appropriate for them, giving them a morale boost and providing them with much-needed shelter from the sun.

The rest of my demo involves installing a water treatment pump to clean a crocodile's pond, building complicated climbing structures for a monkey enclosure, and adding a new Bengal tiger to my zoo. With so many options at my disposal, I felt truly in control of the park, even though I was just briefly dropped in the middle of someone else's creation. If my time in the driver seat of my own zoo is any indication, I'll be pouring a ton of time into Frontier's newest simulation come November.
» Brian Shea

Journey To The Savage Planet

Charting the planet together

Typhoon Studios' debut title is coming further along following its announcement last December. The studio, headed by Far Cry 4 and Assassin's Creed III director Alex Hutchinson, is tasking players with discovering the unknown in Journey to the Savage Planet.

In this title, you step into the shoes of hired explorers attempting to research and discover new alien species and flora on an uncharted planet in an out-of-the-way corner of the galaxy. Your job is to scan the planet and uncover data on whether or not it's suitable for a new human colony. Unfortunately, you've been hired by Kindred Aerospace, the fourth-best rated interstellar exploration company, with the intel to match its reputation. When you arrive, it appears as though this planet is far from uncharted, as a massive tower looms in the distance. Your main missions in Journey to the Savage Planet are to research the species on the planet, investigate the mysterious tower, and gather enough fuel to get home.

Thankfully, you can bring a friend along for the adventure, as Typhoon Studios recently announced cooperative play. Hutchinson describes co-op play as "you and your best friend versus the world," which is an apt way to describe it based on my time playing alongside him. Journeying around with my co-op partner, we tackle encounters together, making them a bit more manageable; it's nice to have one person get in close, with the other providing support from a distance.

It's also beyond helpful that if one player is downed by the wildlife, you can resuscitate your partner. You'll need it; some of the creatures on the savage planet demonstrate why exactly it has earned that name. From small minions with dried sap that require a special acid to eat through to a levitating plant creature that hurls a poisonous goop at you, there's no shortage of creatures looking to kill you. The most intense firefight we experience comes in the form of a quadrupedal beast called the Pikemander. With thick skin around its body, our energy blasts can barely make a ding in. However, when it rests, it lifts its tail high in the air, exposing its weak points. They're difficult to hit, but after a few well-placed shots from the two of us, as well as a beautifully tossed grenade, the beast finally falls.

In situations like that, sticking together makes sense. However, if you really want to check off a ton of missions from your list, you can split up and tackle separate missions. Despite this approach being an option, one of Typhoon's goals is to prevent Journey to the Savage Planet from feeling like a checklist game where you're just robotically running from one area to the next to remove a line-item from your mission list. To work toward this, Typhoon requires you to get creative about how to get from one area to the next. Some areas contain grapple points, while others you can boost jump to reach the platform. In addition, if you've completed a few objectives and are looking to call it a night, co-op in Journey to the Savage Planet is drop-in and drop-out, adding flexibility to the experience.

Journey to the Savage Planet features a semi-open world with a good chunk of content, but Hutchinson expects the game to be on the shorter side of the spectrum in terms of time to complete. However, in today's video game landscape, the launch of a game is rarely the finish line for developers.

"We're planning a few little drops," Hutchinson says. "We're going to give some stuff away for free. If people come along for the ride, we're trying very hard to be generous. And we're a new studio – we have no money in the bank – but we're going to do our best on that. And we'll probably do a paid DLC as well at some point. We'd love to stay in the universe and continue to grow it, and hopefully follow up with another game."

Despite the treacherous world and wildlife, the game features beautiful colors and a tongue-in-cheek sense of humor. When you're aboard your ship (which also serves as a respawn point if you die), you can even view humorous in-universe informercials. One commercial I saw was about a product similar to sea monkeys, only you grow your own miniature human colony, which of course goes horribly wrong.

Journey to the Savage Planet continues to impress with its fun traversal, colorful visuals, and creative world and creature design. I'm excited to uncover the mysteries of this vibrant planet when the title launches early next year. » **Brian Shea**

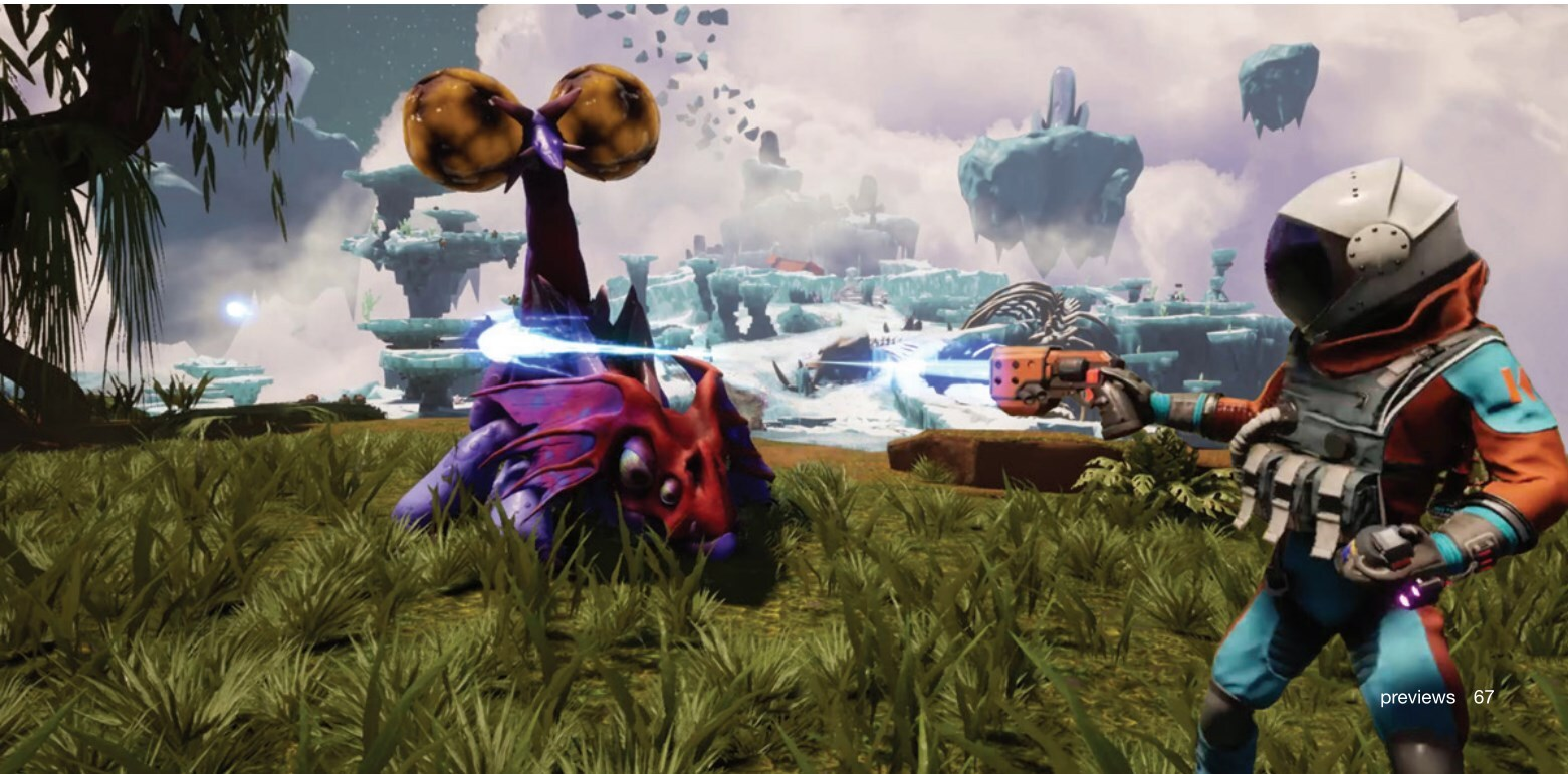
» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
505 Games

» **Developer**
Typhoon Studios

» **Release**
January 28



Luigi's Mansion 3

Cleaning up the haunt

» Platform
Switch

» Style
1 or 2-Player Action

» Publisher
Nintendo

» Developer
Nintendo

» Release
October 31

At PAX West 2019, I played through a level in Luigi's Mansion 3 filled with plants, weeds, and other assorted decaying plantlife. With the assistance of a Nintendo staffer playing as Gooigi, we tackled a variety of puzzles and ghostly encounters as we moved through a floor stuffed with vines, snakes, rats, and secrets. And ghosts, too, of course! The enemy antagonist of this set of floors appears to be some kind of ghostly gardener, a taunting green visage that appeared several times throughout the level to try to impede our progress.

One of the coolest things I got to do was just play around with the vacuum-like Poltergust. There are lots of leaves to blow around in the level, but that's just the start of what you can get up to with it. This was my first time playing any Luigi's Mansion content, and alternately sucking up and blowing away various objects was entertaining.

One of the best rooms in the level features a buzzsaw that you can suck into your contraption, turning it into what's essentially a power mower with a giant blade, spinning around the room and destroying pretty much everything in sight, including a bed, desk, and ensnaring vines blocking progress. There's even a big secret chest full of coins you can find if you're destructively inclined. Sticking plungers on things like giant watermelons and then using the Poltergust to fling them around the room or smash into other objects steals the whole show, though battling ghosts is also a good time.

Standard ghosts can be stunned and sucked in with ease. While I dusted plenty of standard-issue blue ghosts, this floor featured one particular style of enemy that's more challenging than the standard scary enemies. A giant red ghost that reminded me of a Thwomp comes covered in leaves – so you have to blow the leaves off of him before you can stun and suck him in. These leaves function like a shield and offer some floor flavor that's in theme with the rest of the prickly plant obstacles.

Luigi's Mansion 3 releases on October 31 – Halloween – and I'm eager to check out the rest of the mysterious floors and spooky atmosphere within. » **Daniel Tack**

Little Town Hero

From humble beginnings

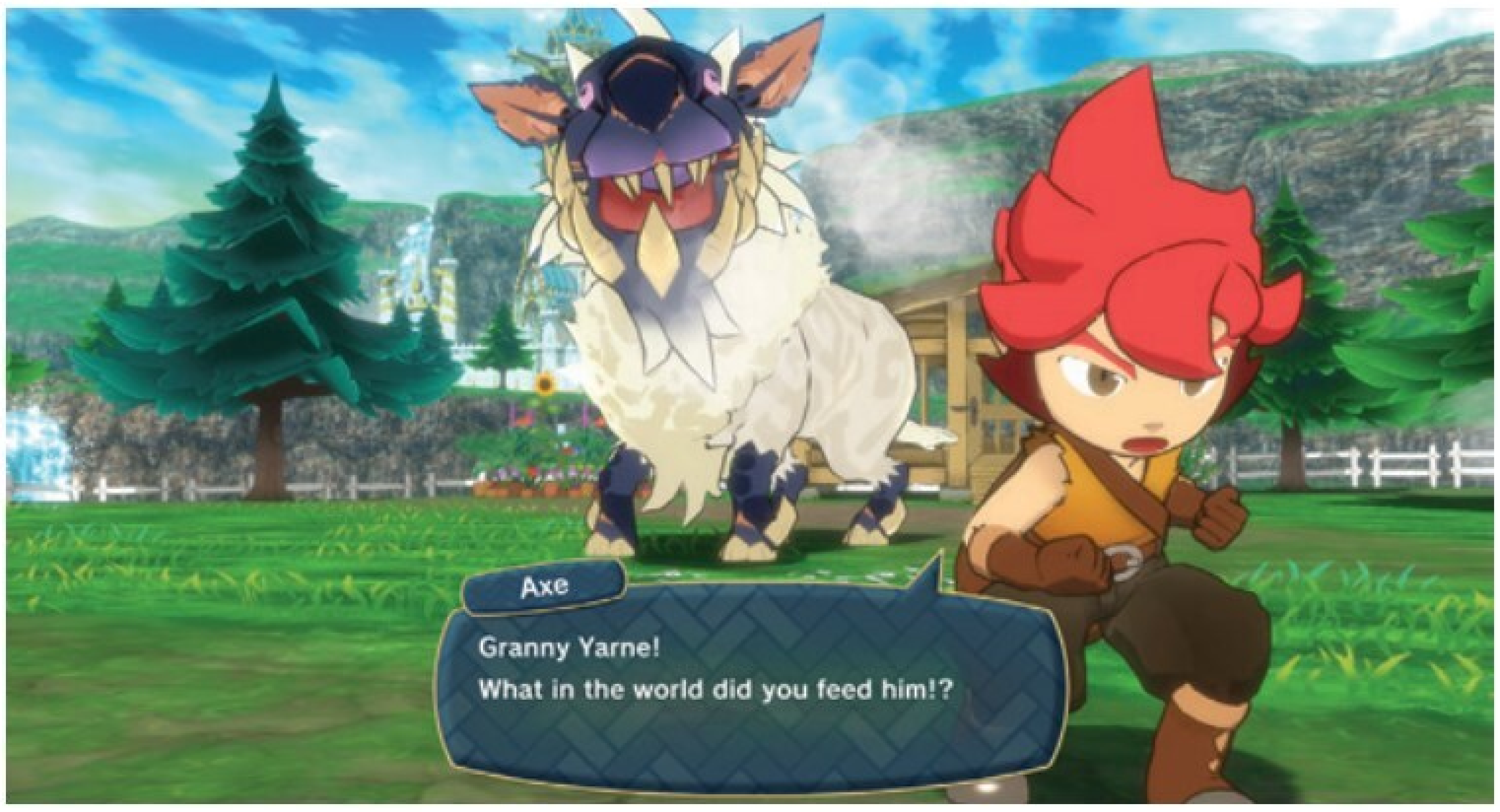
» Platform
Switch

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
Game Freak

» Developer
Game Freak

» Release
October 16



Axe

Granny Yarne!
What in the world did you feed him!?

In a small town on the edge of the world where every citizen must vow to never leave, the residents settle into their quiet lives and never even think about the outside world. In Little Town Hero, a new RPG from Pokémon studio Game Freak, you play as someone a bit more ambitious. As the protagonist, you're not content with simply going about your happy life, never seeing outside the walls of your town. You dream of venturing out and seeing the world. Then the monsters attack.

Using a mysterious red stone you found in the coalmines, your job is to defend your hometown and discover why these monsters have suddenly appeared in the typically quiet town. Doing away with typical RPG weak-enemy grinding, you instead challenge these monsters one at a time in boss-style battles that emphasize strategy above all else.

This smaller project from Game Freak is meant to be more streamlined, intended for gamers who are too busy for a time-sink of an RPG. "We grew up playing these really expansive RPGs where you're on huge adventures that take you all over the place," director Masao Taya says. "But now you're an adult, and maybe you don't have as much time to play so many games like that. Condensing all the fun of those large-scale RPGs into a smaller, shorter, compact package was the initial idea for the game."

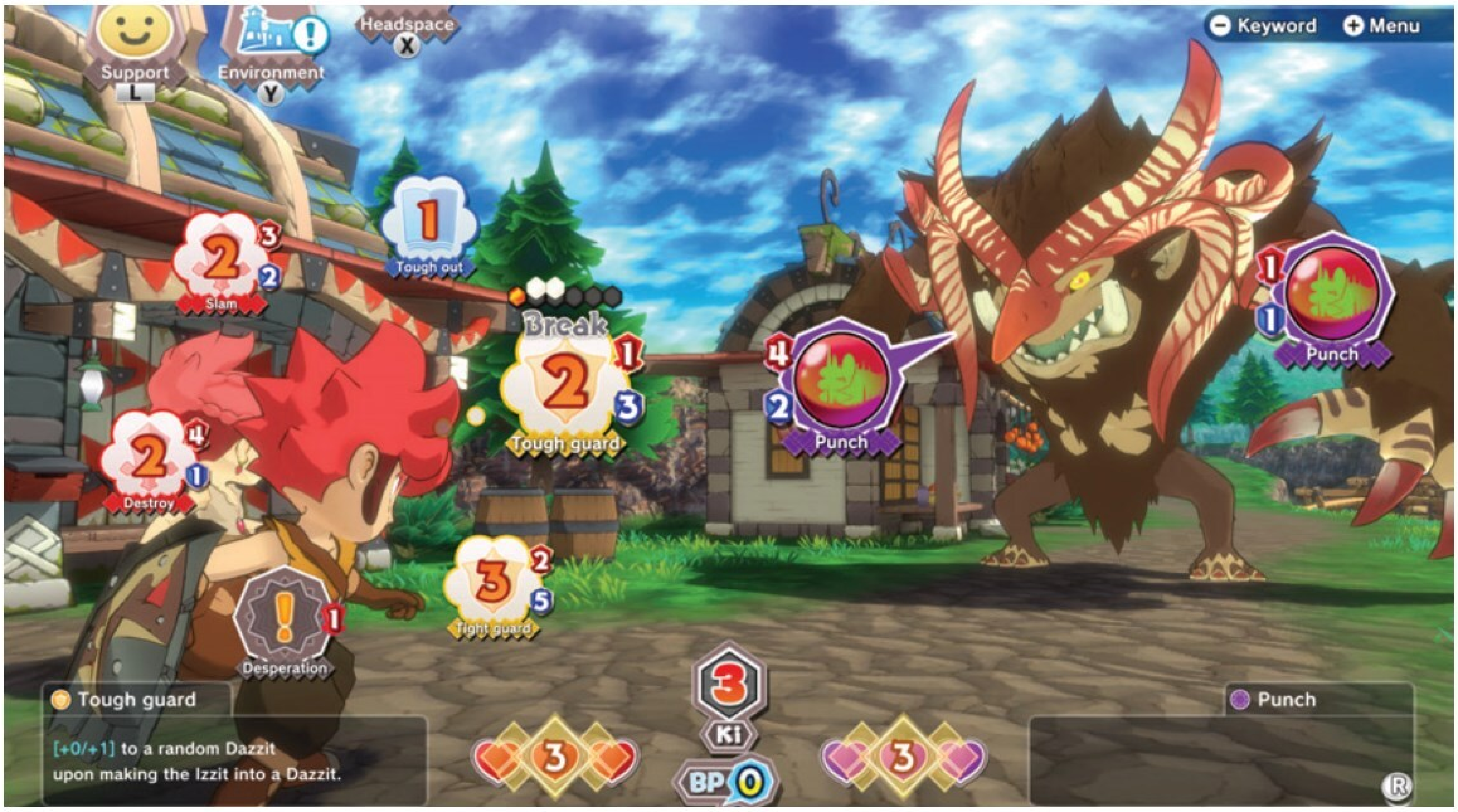
With that initial idea, Little Town Hero was born from an internal initiative at Game Freak implemented to encourage new concepts in the studio. The Gear Project system enables employees at Game Freak to pitch an idea, and if three people at Game Freak are on board, the studio allows them to spend time at work on that idea. For Little Town Hero, Taya pitched the idea and Haruka Tochigi, who is now art director on the project, liked it so much he came up with the visual style you see in the game prior to any unique gameplay mechanics being in place.

While the team is different than the one working on Pokémon Sword and Shield, several team members have worked on the Pokémon series in the past. Taya has been with Game Freak for nearly 20 years. "I've worked on the Pokémon series as a programmer for a very long time, and I was able to use a lot of the learnings of coming up with gameplay ideas and making those efficient and streamlined," Taya says.

One of the recent surprise announcements was that Toby Fox of Undertale fame was joining the project as a composer. The relationship between Game Freak and Fox began when Pokémon series composer Go Ichinose turned a large group of the studio on to Undertale. It quickly became a favorite of Game Freak, then during a party celebrating the Japanese localization of Undertale, the team met with Fox and began discussing potential collaborations.

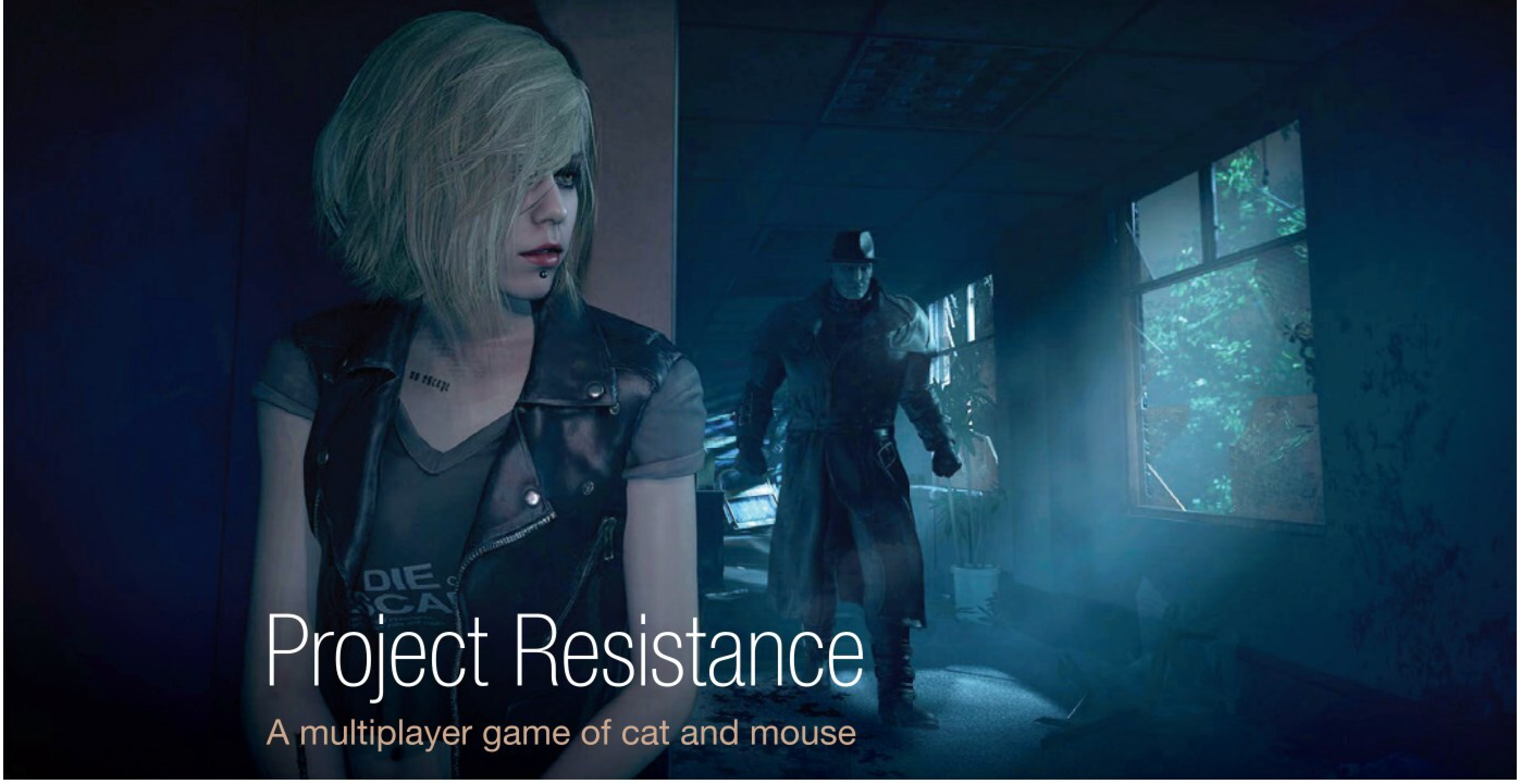
Taya seems happy with how the collaboration between Fox and Pokémon series composer Hitomi Sato turned out for Little Town Hero. "I've gotta say, my biggest worry right now is that the soundtrack might sell more than the game," he says with a laugh.

With unique gameplay concepts and streamlined RPG systems in place, it will be interesting to see how fans of Game Freak and role-playing games embrace Little Town Hero when it launches this month. » **Brian Shea**



Tough guard

[+0/+1] to a random Dazzit upon making the Izzit into a Dazzit.



Project Resistance

A multiplayer game of cat and mouse

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
5-Player Online Action

» Publisher
Capcom

» Developer
Capcom

» Release
TBA

After returning to its roots to much fanfare with Resident Evil 7 and the Resident Evil 2 remake, Capcom is trying something completely different: an asymmetric online multiplayer experience. Set in the Resident Evil universe, Project Resistance has both cooperative and competitive elements while still retaining the series' staples of managing resources, navigating winding corridors, and surviving against deadly zombies. We were on hand at Tokyo Game Show to see the experience in action, and it has some interesting ideas.

Project Resistance has 4v1 matches, where you either play as the Survivors or the Mastermind. If you select Survivor, you work cooperatively with three other players and pick from one of the four different characters. Each has their own unique abilities and roles. Valerie heals teammates, January hacks cameras, Samuel excels in melee attacks, and Tyrone takes reduced damage fulfilling the tank role. For my demo, I play as Valerie, the resident support hero, who comes equipped with the ability to mark items and threats and a limited-duration first-aid spray that heals and buffs nearby teammates. The goal is to complete objectives to open new areas and escape before time runs out. However, one menacing force complicates that: The Mastermind.

Another player assumes the role of the Mastermind, whose goal is to impede the Survivors' progress at all costs. To do that, the Mastermind can set traps, place zombies, and lock doors. Coordinating with your team and sticking together is essential, as you don't want to give the Mastermind an opportunity to take advantage of a player rushing ahead with no help nearby. If a player dies, you get a time penalty, but you also can revive them before that happens.

Just like in any Resident Evil game, turning corners and opening doors comes with great tension as you never know what's awaiting you. Sometimes it's a well-placed Shrieker catching you off guard, others you'll need to act quickly to rescue a teammate in a zombie's clutches. Every match has three stages with different objectives, such as finding items or breaking a transistor.

While playing as a Survivor has you constantly in the moment and on edge, playing as the Mastermind has an entirely different feel, as it requires careful planning and anticipation of your foes' moves. You're pulling the strings from afar by swapping between the various security cameras on the premises to put obstacles in places likely to make them stumble. However, you don't have an endless supply of zombies to deploy. The Mastermind has limited-use cards to execute actions, allowing you to do everything from turning your security camera into a turret to buffing zombies.

There's something so satisfying about watching a player walk right into your trap or placing a zombie behind them as they're trying to activate a switch. However, if at any time, you want to get in on the action, you can take control of any zombie you deploy. This includes the lumbering Tyrant. Controlling this menacing hulk that once tormented you is an adrenaline rush, as chaos ensues with all the Survivors running for their lives. The Tyrant may move slowly, but every attack feels so powerful that even landing a few feels tide-turning. You can ram into enemies, pick them up and squeeze them to death, or swing your deadly fists with reckless abandon. It is by far the highlight of the experience.

Project Resistance may not be what I was expecting next for series, but I can't deny I had fun playing it. Coordinating as a team to make a great escape is a thrill, and toying with your prey as the Mastermind is even more delightful. Capcom is taking fan feedback into account so the game may change before launch, but this is a promising first look. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Emergency Overdrive has sped up energy recharge
-14
-35
Survivor2
350
OVER TIME

Yakuza: Like A Dragon

Bold turn-based moves

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
Sega

» Developer
Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

» Release
2020

Yakuza 6 may have been the conclusion to Kazuma Kiryu's story arc, but the franchise is continuing with new hero Ichiban Kasuga at the helm for Yakuza: Like A Dragon. However, this upcoming installment isn't just the same formula with a different face leading the charge; Sega and its Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio are making other big changes, like implementing a turn-based battle system instead of the series' traditional action-focused fights.

That might seem like a lot of upheaval in a single sequel, but we recently played a demo at Tokyo Game Show showing off the new characters and combat, and we came away excited to see more. Though judging the story from a 10-minute slice of action is tough, this new entry certainly shows promise in its turn-based brawls.

While roaming the city of Yokohama, players get accosted by a variety of violent individuals. As the group of bad guys close in, the encounters might look familiar, since the detailed character models and animations remain impressive. But once combat begins, you don't immediately launch into a series of punches and kicks. Instead, a menu pops up with a variety of options that any RPG fan should recognize, like using a standard attack, special move, or item. All participants get their turn to act, so button-mashing won't help you here.

Fights are still about pounding goons with an array of flashy martial arts and improvised weapons, but now they have a satisfying layer of strategy. Do you attack the enemy who acts next, cure your bleeding status, or try to pull off a big move on the thug closest to you? Positioning is important; this isn't like RPGs with bad guys on one side of the screen and good guys on the other. Battles can happen in haphazard groups, so paying attention to your surroundings can help you hit multiple foes with one attack and manage the crowd efficiently.

In the demo we played, Ichiban travels with two companions who players can also command. They have their own unique (and cinematic) special moves, like using a mouthful of booze to create an all-consuming fire spiral to burn foes. These attacks are hilarious and over-the-top, delivering the series' signature bone-crunching takedowns – just with a new method of execution.

Yakuza: Like a Dragon seems to establish its own identity once the fists start flying. Strategic considerations and cool visual effects prevent the battles from feeling like mechanical RPG encounters, mainly because these fights look like the fights Yakuza fans love. How they evolve over the course of the game remains to be seen, but at this early phase, you shouldn't be scared of this sequel just because it's different.
» Joe Juba

The Outer Worlds

Who we met in the first hour

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Private Division

» **Developer**
Obsidian Entertainment

» **Release**
October 25

The Outer Worlds' release is almost upon us. Before long, players will be creating their own intergalactic adventurers, exploring alien worlds, and swapping stories. Because of the degree to which your choices shape the story in The Outer Worlds, no two players are likely to have identical experiences. This potential for variation is evident even in the first hour of the game, which I recently played at Tokyo Game Show. Players who walk different paths could easily make different acquaintances, but this is a sample of the intriguing individuals I met during the game's opening.

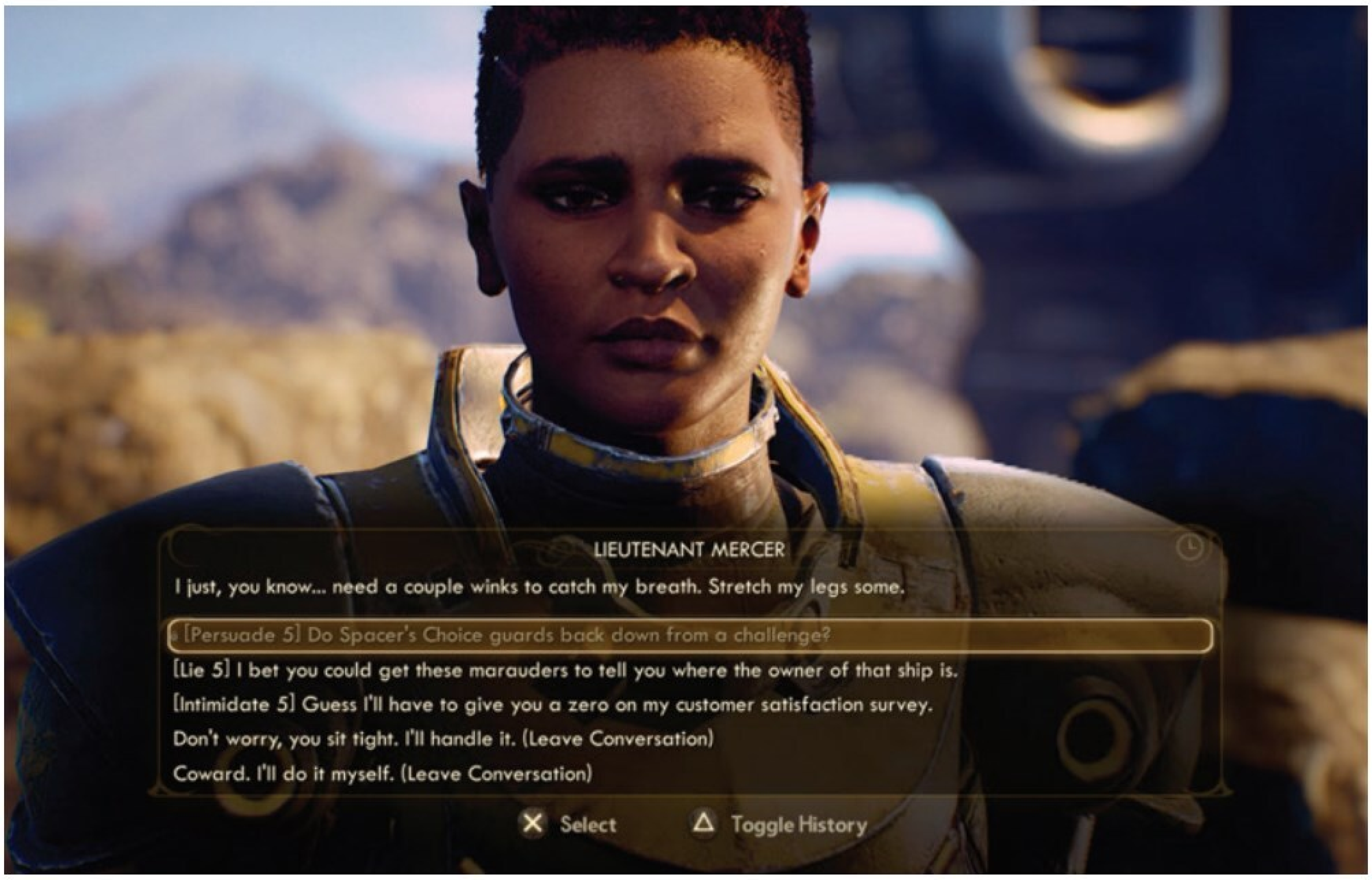
Lieutenant Mercer & Private Kimball
These two are in a bind. They want to cite the pilot responsible for a landing violation (the ship in question did not use an official Spacer's Choice landing pad), but the area is crawling with marauders. I persuade them to address the problem head-on, but both Mercer and Kimball are killed in the ensuing battle. By me.

ADA
The A.I. on the ship that landed illegally. After failing to scare me off with bogus threats of deaths, ADA explains that it can only take orders from Captain Hawthorne. So, by necessity, I am now Captain Hawthorne. I head out in search of a power regulator to get the ship running, which becomes my main quest.

Ernest
The affable gentlemen meets me outside the ship. He works for Spacer's Choice HR, gathering the remains of the recently deceased Mercer and Kimball. He isn't judgmental, which I appreciate, and suggests I go to the city of Edgewater. Even so, it seems like he knows too much.

Silas
He stands outside Edgewater, flanked by a couple guards. Beyond that, I don't know what his deal is. Or rather, "was." I bludgeon him before our conversation even begins.

Amelia Kim
She tends the bar Spacer's Choice bar in Edgewater, and she does the job well – though she isn't friendly about it. She also has the distinction of being one of the few named NPCs I don't immediately attack on sight during my demo. Maybe it's because I'm struck by her loyalty and no-nonsense attitude. Or maybe it's because the bar is full of other patrons and I don't know if I'd survive the aftermath.



LIEUTENANT MERCER

I just, you know... need a couple winks to catch my breath. Stretch my legs some.

[Persuade 5] Do Spacer's Choice guards back down from a challenge?
[Lie 5] I bet you could get these marauders to tell you where the owner of that ship is.
[Intimidate 5] Guess I'll have to give you a zero on my customer satisfaction survey.
Don't worry, you sit tight. I'll handle it. (Leave Conversation)
Coward. I'll do it myself. (Leave Conversation)

Reed Tobson
The bowler-hat-wearing town boss in Edgewater. He won't give me the power regulator in Edgewater, but he has a suggestion for where I can get another one: Go to the geothermal plant and reroute power from the botanical district, where a group of deserters led by Adelaide are living. They would return to their posts, and I would get their regulator. It's an interesting proposition, and I respond with my melee weapon.

Parvati Holcomb
In an apologetic tone, Parvati was explaining to Reed that the Spacer's Choice cannery (which she calls "Bess") is taking longer than expected to repair. Through the course of this conversation, Parvati becomes my first official party member. When I kill Reed, she agrees to stay with me – if only to protect the rest of the world from my stupidity.

Adelaide McDevitt
As the leader of the people in the botanical district, Adelaide is kind and understanding. She offers me food and medical treatment. Instead of responding with aggression, I tell her about Reed's plan to steal power from her district, and she offers an alternative: Instead of rerouting power away from her people, I should take it from Edgewater. Yes, that will put people there in a tough spot, but it will also free them from service to Spacer's Choice. I consider Adelaide's offer and leave in peace (for once). I have two viable options in front of me, and a tough decision to make when I finally get to the core of the geothermal plant. » **Joe Juba**

Kerbal Space Program 2

Journey to the stars through trial, error, and a little luck

Kerbals are nothing, if not persistent. The alien creatures have ambitions far beyond the constraints of their home world, Kerbin, and they're willing to do whatever it takes to get off its surface. Their engineering may not always be up to snuff, but they're happy to learn from their mistakes – no matter how catastrophic – and give it another shot. Before we get too smug, we should note their space-exploration successes far outweigh what we Earthlings have accomplished. That trend is likely to continue next year, too, with the release of Kerbal Space Program 2, which gives Kerbals the power to explore beyond their own solar system.

I recently talked with creative director Neil Simpson about KSP 2, and his passion was impossible to ignore. Squad, the studio behind the first game, has handed development over to Star Theory Games (formerly Uber Entertainment), but this new team isn't exactly flying blind. Simpson says he's put more than 2,000 hours into the original KSP since 2012, and he's been known as the office superfan. "I absolutely believe it's the best game of all time, and that's a pretty high bar," he says. He says the challenge his team faces is to not take anything away from the core game or to fundamentally change any mechanics. "But we've been living with this game for eight years, and we've all got some ideas around how we can smooth some of the rough edges," he says. "So that's very exciting."

How does someone put thousands of hours into Kerbal Space Program? Simpson says it comes down to something he jokingly refers to as the Magic Diamond of Awesomeness. The original game put players in a world with a realistic physics simulation, challenged them to build something from modular parts, and then tested those creations against what Simpson calls "harsh reality." As he puts it, it's a puzzle game at its heart.

Kerbals could explore their solar system once they mastered the basics of space travel (thanks to plenty of trial and error), but Kerbin was the home base in most senses of the term. Kerbal 2 will allow players to move beyond their Kennedy Space Center counterpart thanks to new colonization options. Now, once you land on a far-away celestial body, you can plant your flag and establish a new colony. Those colonies can be used as hubs to build new vehicles, too, once they're established enough and your Kerbals' Science rating is sufficient. Reach a certain point, and you can even build orbital platforms, which will allow you to build and launch ships beyond gravitational constraints – and equipped for interstellar travel. Those ships will necessarily be much larger than what engineers may be accustomed to working with. "They need to be that big to carry enough fuel to burn continuously for multiple years and decelerate for even more years to get to new star system," Simpson says.

Even though Kerbals are green, bug-eyed aliens, one of the appeals of KSP is that the simulation is rooted in reality. Despite its silly veneer, players have to reconcile with how flight, propulsion, and other elements of space travel actually work in our world. Science-fiction writers have come up with ways that their characters could traverse the stars, but Simpson says he pumped the brakes on some of those commonly used tropes during KSP 2's development. "I sent out a document to the company very early on, specifying what they could and couldn't do." That means things like warp drives or warp gates – things he calls "touchy feely" – were out. Instead, his team is looking at bleeding-edge engine and propulsion tech to see what's within reach of being realistic. "We've been in contact with subject-matter experts in aerospace and astrophysics," Simpson says. "It's been a real roller-coaster ride in terms of leveling up my own knowledge."

Simpson isn't talking quite yet about what those new planets might have to offer, but he does share that they're not going to be carbon copies of one another. Going back to the puzzle-like nature of the KSP experience, players are likely to encounter unique hazards when they attempt to land, including severe gravity, hostile atmospheres, and uneven geography. In other words, getting within orbit of a new planet is just the beginning of the Kerbals' potential woes.

There are couple of other things Simpson can't go into at the moment, both of which may send fan imaginations into orbit. First, the game's engine has been overhauled to accommodate multiplayer, though what that means at the moment is under wraps. "There is multiplayer, and it's rad," he teases. Because of that work, the team was able to design Kerbal 2 in such a way to allow people to get under the hood in new ways. "We think modders are going to be very, very happy with the increased access they have," he adds. That's in addition to U.I. improvements that make part placement more precise, enhanced tutorials to get new players acclimated to the systems, and more.

Simpson says he and his team have been in constant contact with Squad during development. "They have input on anything we do, and we ask them their opinion on it," he says. "Sometimes we have differing opinions, and they've actually improved a couple of things about our game just by giving their opinions." That said, Kerbal Space Program 2 is absolutely Star Theory's ship. "For the most part, we just default into a position of alignment because we're such big fans of the game, and I think our instincts are generally in the right place." » **Jeff Cork**

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Simulation (Multiplayer TBA)

» Publisher
Private Division

» Developer
Star Theory Games

» Release
Spring 2020 (PC)

Death Stranding

Finding positivity in isolation

» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Adventure

» **Publisher**
Sony Interactive
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Kojima Productions

» **Release**
November 8

After a few years of mysterious trailers and high-concept discussions, it feels strange to finally get solid info about Death Stranding. But that's exactly what happened at this year's Tokyo Game Show, as creator Hideo Kojima took the stage at the PlayStation booth to showcase two lengthy live demos that made the structure and flow of the upcoming game much clearer.

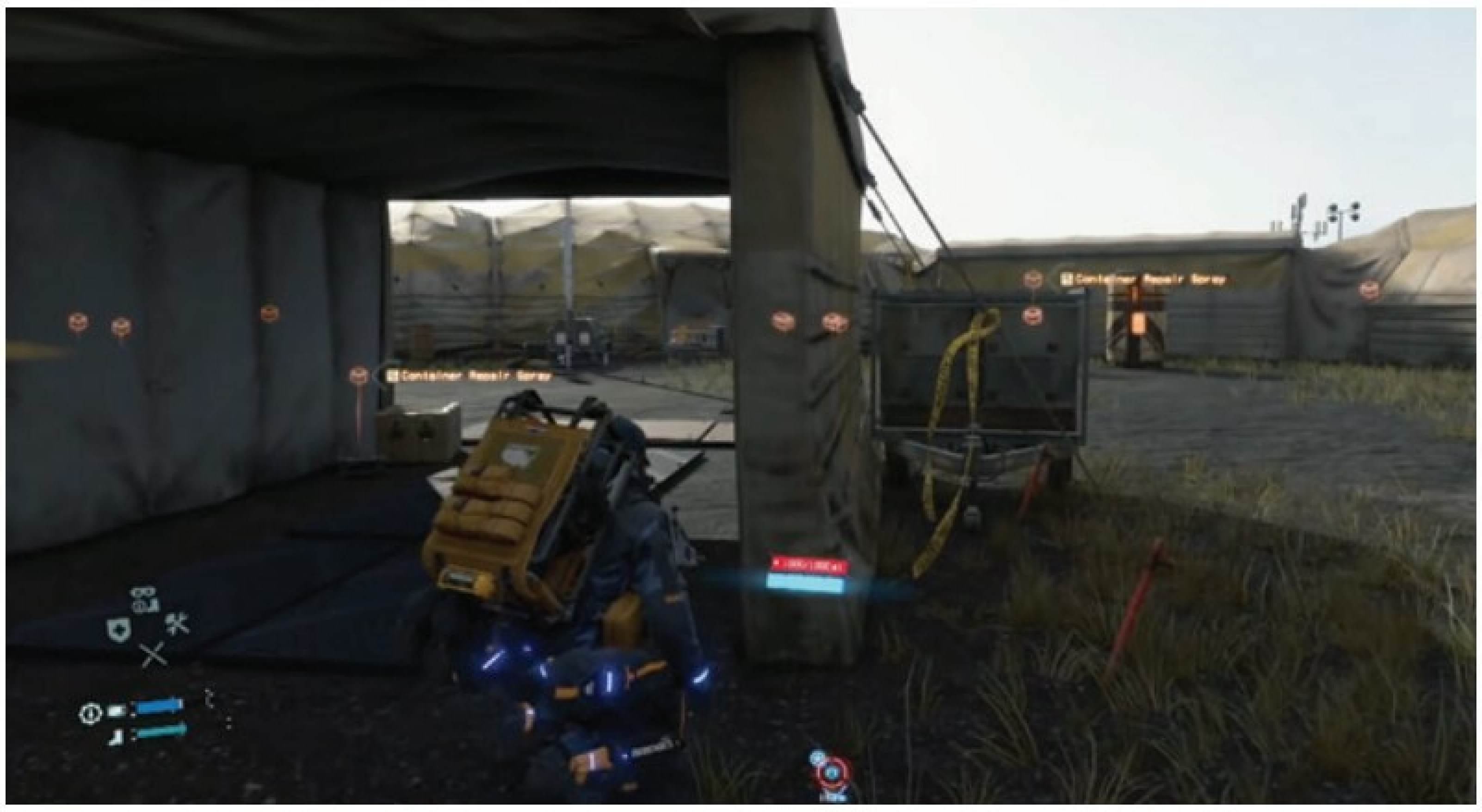
The biggest revelation came from Kojima's explanation of Death Stranding's unique method of connecting players. Instead of traditional multiplayer, Death Stranding pulls objects from other players' worlds and inserts them into yours. At one point during the demo, protagonist Sam uses a ladder (which was placed by another player) to cross a gap. Whenever you use another player's object, it automatically grants the object a "like," though you can manually add more likes if the contribution was especially helpful – like a motorcycle you can use to traverse land quickly.

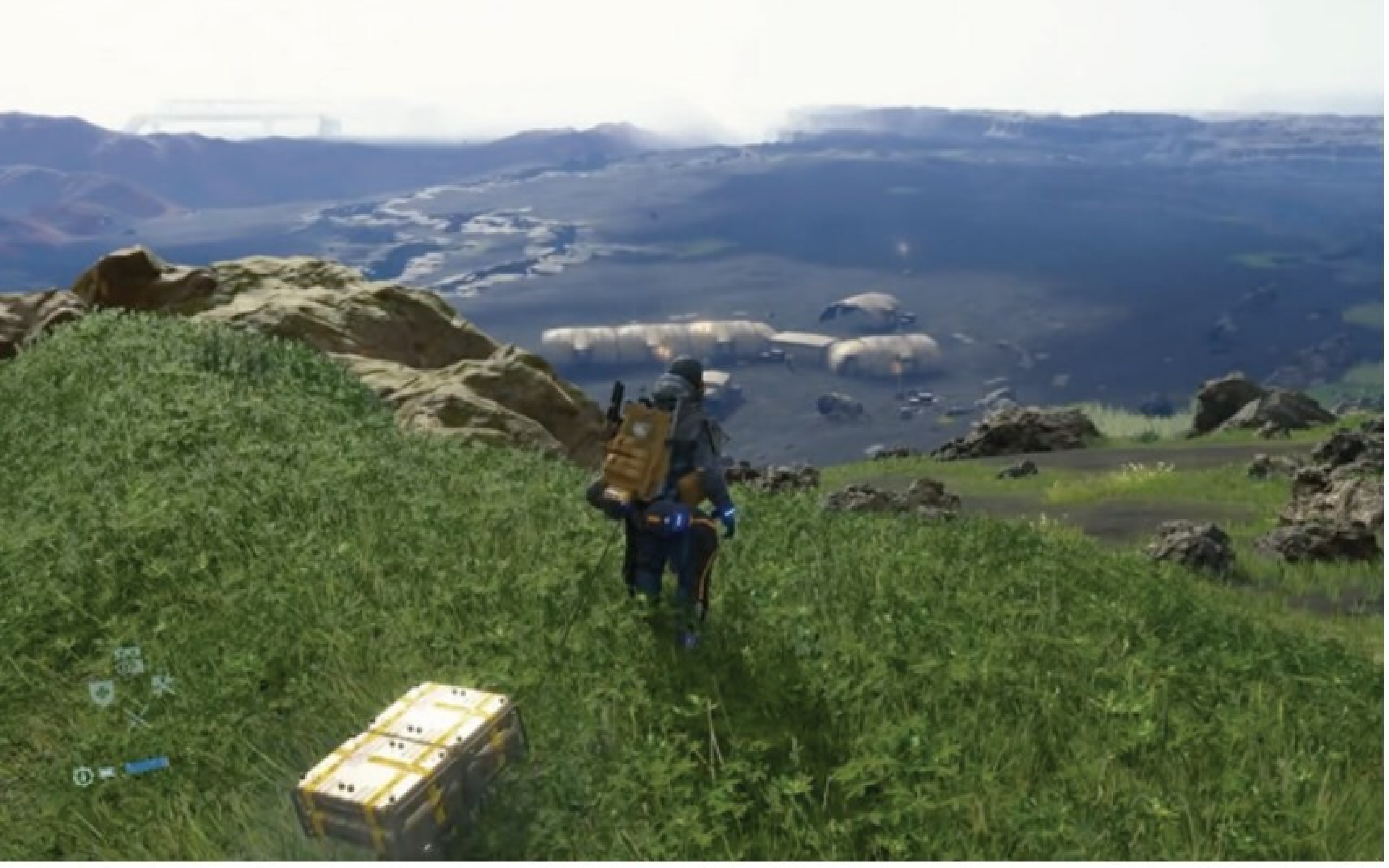
You may also find undelivered packages abandoned by other people, which you can pick up and deliver to reap the rewards. While Sam does not encounter any other players physically, this evidence of their presence keeps you thinking about how their actions – and your own – could be interpreted, and has the potential to give the world a dynamic, unpredictable quality.

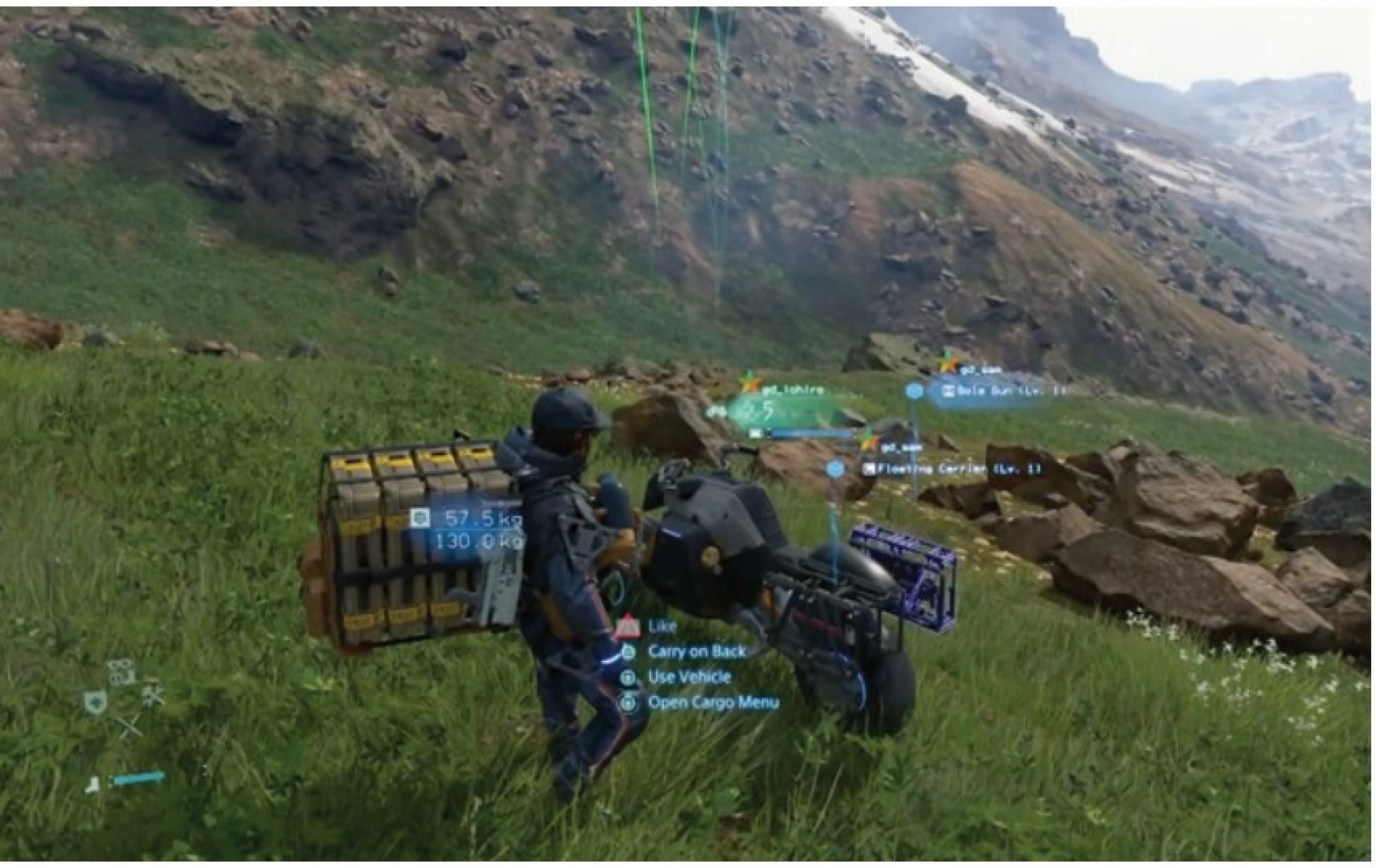
We also learned that Sam's ultimate goal is travel across North America from east to west, reinstating the "chiral network" to keep people connected along the way. This long journey is composed of shorter delivery missions, where you load up with packages (like medical supplies) to take from one settlement to another. You need to be mindful of how much you carry, as well as the tools you bring along. How many batteries will you need? What about grenades, a lucky charm, or an extra pair of boots? These questions force you to consider your route and the conditions along the way so you can be as prepared as possible for any surprises.

Kojima's second demonstration focused almost entirely on the concept of private rooms – customizable spaces in safehouses that give players a new way to interact with Sam. Because he is constantly on the move, Sam doesn't have a centralized base of operations, but he can construct safehouses along the way (which may then populate other players' games). Instead of controlling Sam directly in private rooms, you only move the camera to focus on different areas of interest. Look at Sam, and he might pose for the camera. Repeatedly look at his crotch, and he punches the camera. The fourth wall is regularly broken down here, with Sam pleading with you directly or motioning toward things he wants you to investigate, like the shower. You can also customize the colors and objects on display when in your own private room, so when (or if) other players encounter it, they see your handiwork.

Though private rooms may seem goofy at first, they highlight the importance of rest in Sam's long and lonely adventure. He is generally exploring in solitude. The elements work against him, his equipment degrades, and dangerous supernatural threats lurk in the shadows. The bulk of Death Stranding's gameplay is dealing with those challenges, but from time to time, it might be nice to heal up and relax in a place that feels comfortable. Because once you leave, the grim reality of Death Stranding's world starts bearing down on you again. » **Joe Juba**







In His Own Words

While at Tokyo Game Show, we interviewed Death Stranding creator Hideo Kojima, asking questions about the gameplay and philosophies that support the experience. He had a lot of interesting things to say on several topics, but these are some of the most illuminating excerpts.

KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS
DEATH STRANDING

On whether "likes" do anything:
All these staff members said to me, "We have to give them kudos or points or whatever," but that would be like a normal game – any other game. So I said, "Giving 'likes' is giving unconditional love."

On walking:
In this game, I think you will not understand if I just say this, but once you start playing the game, just walking in that world is really fun. What I realized is, when I monitor play-tests – even the staff's – they don't get it at first. But when they really start playing, just walking is really fun in the space. And now everyone will say, "Oh, it's a walking simulator!"

On what players will think when the credits roll:
Well, I should really not say and leave it to the users. But the theme of the game is connection; you will understand the meaning of it. Like in dramas, or games, or online – everything comes together, and you see the end credits. But I just want people to finish the game.

On the cryptic trailers:
I haven't lied at all – I just create the story as-is. In the trailers, maybe I just put out the scenes in between. But if you play from the start to the end, you will understand because it's all connected. All the side plots are kind of recovered, all the small stories and things like that.

On creating a new genre:
A new concept is really difficult to explain at the start. The stealth game, no one really got it when I first presented it. Your first enemies are always your staff, or the people working with you. "You carry things, you connect, and you only give thumbs-up – what's fun about that?" was the first reaction. If I had listened, it would just be a normal game. But a lot of staff, they believed me. They said, "Okay, we'll try it out."

On connection:
I'm not saying it's positive or negative to connect. It's really up to the players to see how they feel while playing the game.

Read the full interview at gameinformer.com

Ring Fit Adventure

Nintendo's latest step on the path to fitness

» **Platform**
Switch
» **Style**
1-Player Action
» **Publisher**
Nintendo
» **Developer**
Nintendo
» **Release**
October 18

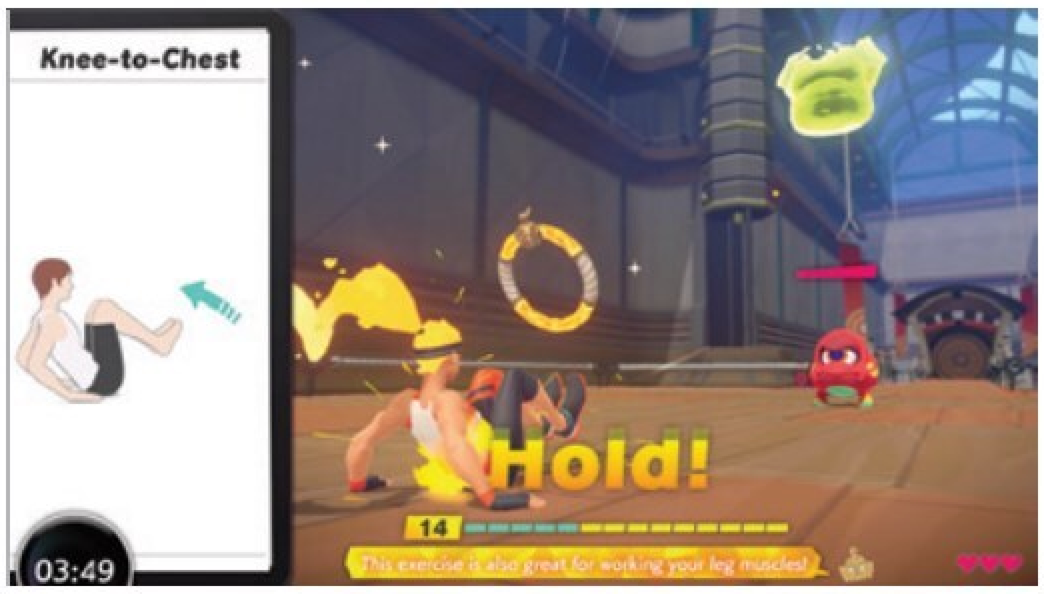
Nintendo made the world sit up and take notice with the release of Wii Fit. The fitness game was an engaging way for players to at least make an effort toward getting into shape as they played games based on a weight- and balance-sensing peripheral. Now, more than a decade later, the company is ready to get players up and off their couches again. Ring Fit Adventure has a new set of accessories – including the titular Ring-Con – and a monster-busting wrapper to help you burn calories without getting burned out in the process.

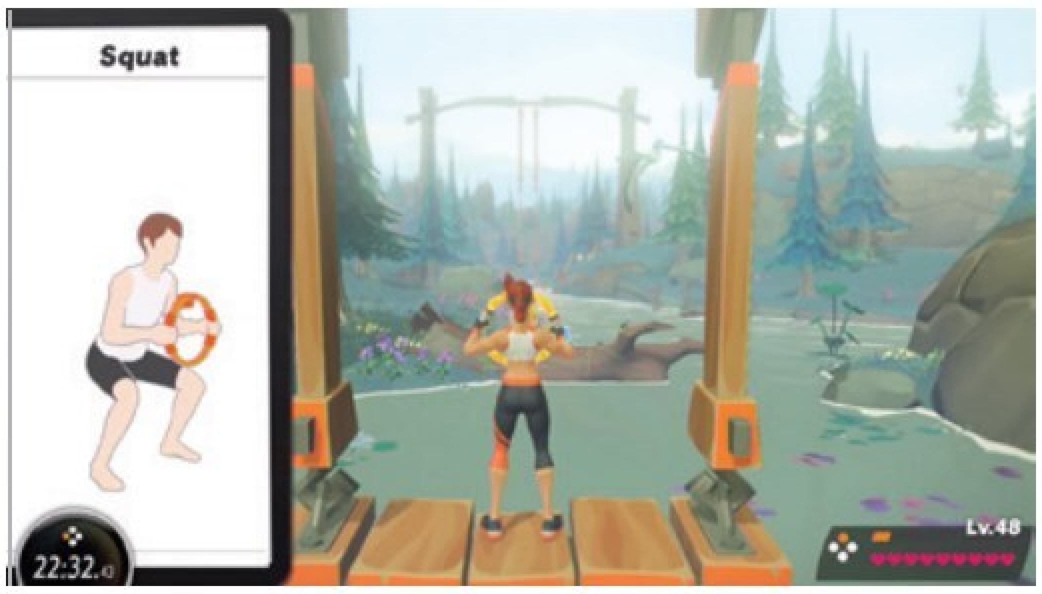
After putting your Switch's Joy-Cons into the Ring-Con and leg strap, you're ready to take on Ring Fit Adventure's adventure mode. You travel between areas by jogging in place, using the Ring-Con to blow past obstacles. The device has adjustable resistance settings to accommodate players of various levels, so don't worry if you aren't quite in peak physical form. When you squeeze its sides inward, your on-screen character will emit a blast of air – perfect for moving obstructions out of the way, or, when aimed downward, for getting a boost to leap over them. In addition to jogging, players will be able to mix up their transportation options with virtual versions of paddleboarding, rolling, and flying, which will have their own unique ways to incorporate the Ring-Con.

It's not just a peaceful romp down the path, however. Along the way, you'll encounter monsters who want to challenge you to fit battles. Here, you perform exercises like squats, overhead presses, and other moves to defeat your foes. There are 40 different moves to master, split into four categories: arms, core, legs, and yoga. Each category is color coded, and if you choose the right one you can deal extra damage. Think of it as a sweatier version of Pokémon. If you'd rather get a more traditional workout, you can check out quick-play options or tackle playlists of exercises that target particular parts of your body.

Ring Fit Adventure also offers a host of minigames, like a virtual treadmill, climbing wall, and, oddly enough, a pottery-wheel challenge. In these, you can work to set a personal best or make it a social thing and gather your friends to see who can reach the top of the leaderboards.

The Ring-Con may look a little silly, but people had some snarky things to say about Wii Fit before it launched, too. After selling more than 20 million units, Nintendo had the last laugh. Whether Ring-Cons will be an ubiquitous living-room presence, like the Wii Fit Balance Board was, remains to be seen. If nothing else, we're looking forward to having another excuse to move our bodies. » **Jeff Cork**





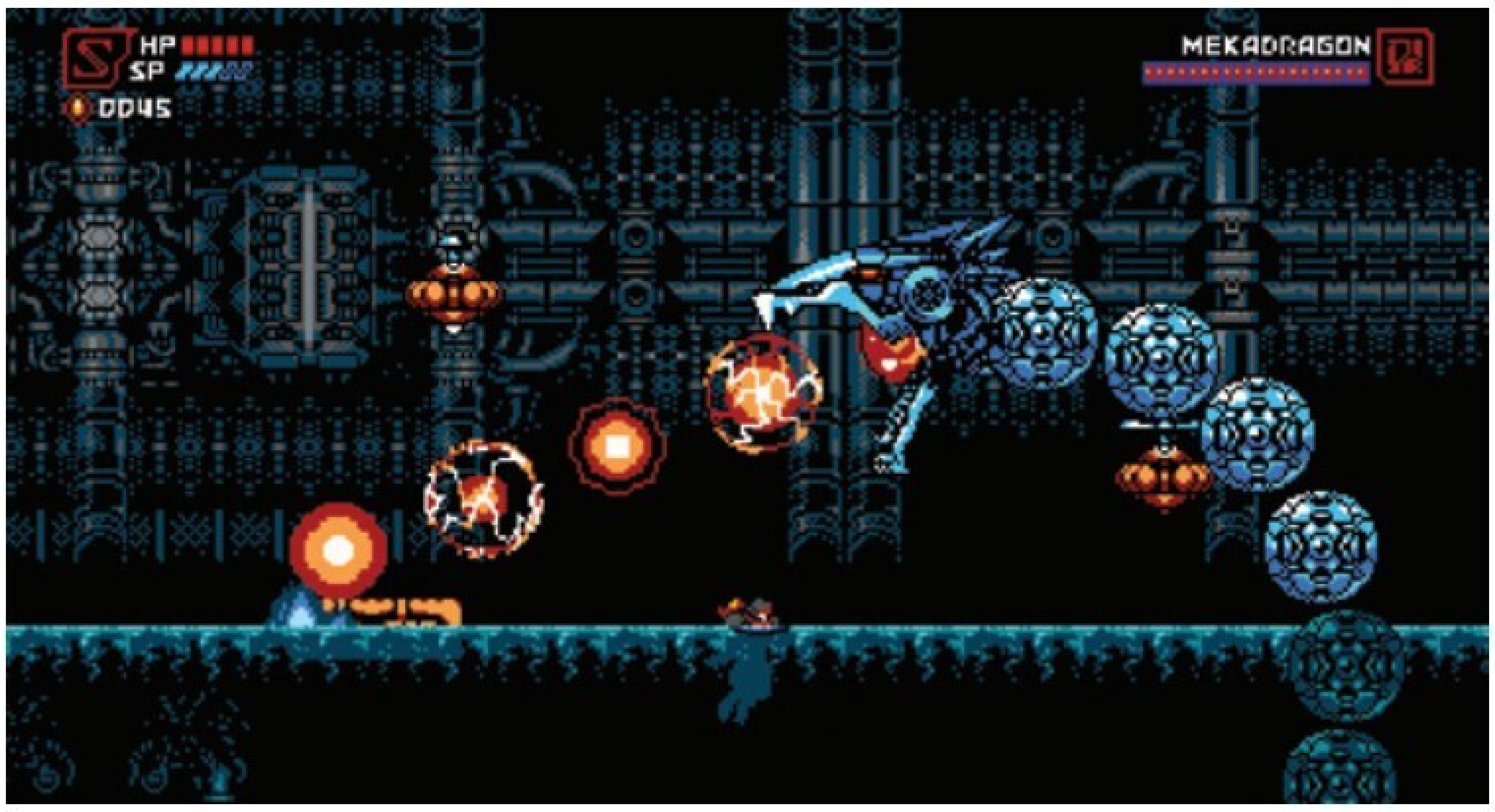
Cyber Shadow

Wearing its inspiration on its sleeve

Games inspired by the 8-bit era aren't rare these days, but it's always nice to see one from an indie dev that so obviously has an abundance of love for the retro-action genre. That appears to be the case with Cyber Shadow, a game from Mechanical Head Studios. Combining the gameplay and level design of Ninja Gaiden with boss battles directly inspired by Contra, Cyber Shadow has landed firmly on my radar.

I played through two stages of Cyber Shadow, an early one with relatively little resistance, and a stage from the middle of the game with turrets and enemies galore. Tight gameplay, well-designed 8-bit visuals, and a terrific soundtrack contribute to making it feel like a worthy spiritual successor to Ninja Gaiden.

Swinging the ninja's sword feels good, and I love using the various powerups. From powerful shuriken to a unique circular blade that whips around you as you move and attack, you uncover various ways to augment your combat. My favorite was an upward slash that sent fireballs hurtling above.



The enemies range from flying creatures to mechanical dragons, but the main attraction is the boss battles. The two I took on felt like a strong mix of Ninja Gaiden and Contra. The first one, Smasher, could have fit right in as the first boss of a game in Konami's popular side-scrolling shooter. I had to avoid projectiles from above, as well as shockwaves, while waiting for the devious machine to reveal its weakpoint. The second boss was a heavily-armored ninja mech with multiple forms. Slashing him and throwing fireballs with reckless abandon, I almost lose sight of my own health as I watch his bar plummet. However, I dodge his final thrust and counter with a flurry of slashes to finish him off.

Cyber Shadow looks to deliver exciting challenges and fun gameplay based on the popular formula from decades ago. If what I played in my demo is any indication, I'm on board. » **Brian Shea**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Yacht Club Games

» **Developer**
Mechanical Head Games

» **Release**
TBA

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reviews

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

88 The Legend Of Zelda: Link's Awakening

This remake shows that Link's Game Boy adventure wasn't just a portable novelty. Beautiful new visuals and some much-needed quality-of-life enhancements make it easier to go back to this wonderful game, but the core of the experience is a faithful recreation of the original. Play it and see why it remains a beloved entry in the long-running series.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Shaved Tangela.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

NBA 2K20

A game of runs

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (10-Player Online) **Publisher** 2K Sports **Developer** Visual Concepts **Release** September 6 **Rating** E

8.5

The NBA 2K franchise has gotten so large that it services niche fanbases as much as it tries to appeal to the masses. Some players grind out progress and chase the badge meta of MyCareer, others rebuild the NBA as they see fit in MyLeague, and then there's the never-ending card collecting of MyTeam. All are rightfully NBA 2K fans and deserve to get joy from their favorite basketball title.

This, however, puts developer Visual Concepts in a tough position because if you try going in different directions at once you risk going nowhere at all. This is nothing new for the franchise, which has not only become the preeminent basketball title, but some argue the best sports title period. Visual Concepts has responded in recent years to this pressure by adding new features to many of its modes. NBA 2K20 does this like its predecessors, but as much as it tries to carry the franchise forward, it is burdened by the past.

A prime example of this is MyCareer, which lets players loose in the open world-ish Neighborhood area to grind their player up the ladder. NBA 2K20 tweaks how you make your MyPlayer, letting gamers choose their hard attribute caps within templates of preset strengths and weaknesses. Your abilities are broken out into the finishing, shooting, playmaking, and defense/rebounding buckets, which also house the all-important badges that confer bonuses.

Grinding to increase your attributes through the VC currency (earned throughout the game and buyable with real money) is a central part of the experience, and although you can create multiple builds, each one starts over at 60 OVR and any VC you've earned cannot be re-allocated to the new build. This exposes the illusion of freedom of having different builds in the first place, and given how important having the appropriate attribute levels, badges, and even physical features are in multiplayer, you must choose carefully.

The mode's grind itself is exacerbated by an infrastructure that needs updating. You still have to wait in real-time for MyPark games and training stations, and there is no matchmaking in the mode. This significantly dampens my incentive to take my lumps against players who may have paid real money for VC to expedite progress.

Thankfully MyCareer also lets players grow through NBA games against the A.I., providing a different outlet for your character. This is bolstered by cutscenes along the way, including the well-done Prelude story put together by Lebron James' SpringHill Entertainment that advocates players embracing what agency they have in power structures that preferred they didn't.

MyGM also surfaces the needs of players via the conversation system, but it drags down the mode. The action-point system driving what you can do in a day isn't interesting when you have to spend it constantly chit chatting with players to hold inane, repetitive conversations about waffles just to keep up their morale. You also have to constantly fend off their requests for minutes. Unlocking GM abilities like training and scouting is understandable, but I don't like that it's tied to objectives that might not make sense like signing lots of veteran players at the behest of the team owner. The actual skill tree itself, which is a part of the entire process, is okay but nothing special.

MyLeague is similar to MyGM in many respects, but without the action-point system, and reveals many of the series' strengths, such as the ability to customize the league in myriad ways via rules, rosters, and the teams themselves (including adding historic ones), as well as the analytics at your disposal. These are the kind of franchise options that few sports games deliver. The series adds the WNBA for the first time, although this is just for a single playable season and in Play Now.

NBA 2K20 also comes through in the gameplay department, allowing individual expression within a team dynamic. Pulling off fancy dribble moves isn't hard, but passing the ball around, running plays, and putting it all together at the right times to generate space to sink shots is a deep, satisfying path to consistent scoring. Although the low post area can be a jumble of animations, the game adapts well to your commands with branching animations that give you the flexibility while driving to the basket to reroute your path or pass the ball at the last second to an open teammate.

Playing defense is just as important, and I appreciate the fine line between success and failure in contesting shots and the physicality of trying to get in front of the better players so they don't just blow by – although I haven't mastered the timing of boxing out and rebounding.

At launch the game has had problems, such as MyCareer players not being awarded earned progress, and MyTeam single-player Triple Threat challenges not being accessible (at least MyTeam's overall progression isn't bad). These kinds of hiccups are usual for Visual Concepts, and partly prove that the NBA 2K series – as strong as it is in some areas – needs to keep working. » **Matthew Kato**

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Keep delivering on the gameplay front and the overall strength of its League structure while inadvertently reinforcing how MyPark needs significant changes

» **Graphics**
A nitpick of an otherwise gorgeous game: Sweat only comes in one flow – heavy-duty

» **Sound**
I love having multiple commentary teams, and I appreciate that they call out substitutions during timeouts

» **Playability**
The controls easily accommodate a surprising amount of actions, letting you concentrate on what's actually going on instead

» **Entertainment**
There's a lot to chew on in this game, good and not as good, but thankfully the gameplay delivers

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

Borderlands 3

Sticking to its guns

8

Style 1-Player Shooter (4-Player Online) **Publisher** 2K Games **Developer** Gearbox Software **Release** September 13 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Return to the bleak but humorous Borderlands for a lengthy adventure that rarely sees your finger leave the trigger

» Graphics
The familiar style is intact and attractive, but you could be excused for feeling that little has changed in the years since the last game

» Sound
Over-the-top voice work (including some celebrity surprises) vacillates between genuinely funny and irritating prattle

» Playability
Smart changes to mobility, solid gunplay, and a well-crafted set of new abilities make the game accessible to a broad range of players – if you're willing to invest a lot of time

» Entertainment
An old formula executed well, Borderlands 3 rarely takes chances, or strays from expectation

» Replay Value
Moderately high

A lot has changed in the FPS game scene since 2012, when the last numbered entry of Borderlands arrived in our gaming machines. In all the ways that matter, the sequel hews closely to the blueprint established in that well-loved release, exploding forth onto our screens with a bevy of wild weaponry, asinine humor, and bloody battles. The formula feels dated. But with some updates to UI and gameplay, and a huge adventure across a variety of destinations, it's easy to embrace the insanity once again, even if – in the back of your head – you know it all feels just a bit too familiar.

Players once again jump into the role of one of four unique vault hunters, each with engaging gimmicks that set their playstyles apart. From the brawling melee charges of the latest Siren to the mech-powered sustained assaults of the Gunner, each character offers a range of build options, and theorycrafting your way to a powerful murder machine is especially compelling after several dozen hours of play and earned skill points. Most of those playstyles borrow liberally from earlier games or other franchises entirely, so most powersets will feel like an old pair of shoes to genre faithful – easy to slip into, but with few surprises.

Across an especially lengthy campaign, Borderlands 3 skewers internet and corporate culture in equal measures, satirizing the inherent narcissism and selfishness of both with the series' trademark sophomoric wit. The humor is certainly hit and miss, but the writers seem to have adopted the philosophy that you miss 100 percent of the shots you don't take; the chatter is nearly constant. Storytelling feels more epic this time as the heroes jet between planets. Previous games in the franchise have sometimes felt too tied to a particular environment, and this new installment combats that stale sensation with several well-realized locales, from an idyllic monastery to a corporate megacity. The variety is a welcome diversion, and keeps the visual palette pleasing.

Guns are once again the real stars of the show, with an unreal assortment of firearms that feature just as much gameplay variety as visual uniqueness. I enjoy the varied options at hand, and the solid gunplay across the board ensures engagement for many hours. From assault rifles that launch blasts of radiation to a pistol that shoots rockets, there's no end of experimentation to be had. If anything, the plethora of

options can feel overwhelming and slow down the otherwise frenzied pace of play as you simply try to figure out what is worth keeping or selling – a problem exacerbated by cumbersome inventory management and too few sell spots. It doesn't help that weapons only sometimes conform to their expected archetypes. When a pistol is sometimes a better long-range option than a sniper, how best to judge an item's utility at a glance?

Sliding under gaps and mantling over obstacles contribute to the fast flow of exploration, and I appreciate the sense of speed and mobility. Combat is frenetic but simplistic, especially in the early hours, as waves of enemies spawn repeatedly to be mown down. Later hours offer more interesting mixes of foes, but suffer from a different problem; many bad guys are extreme bullet sponges, extending fights in a way that feels unnecessary in an already meaty campaign playthrough. Several bosses are especially guilty of this sin, and can make for a miserable slog, especially played solo, where endless circle strafing quickly loses its appeal.

Like its predecessors, Borderlands 3 is at its best when played cooperatively with up to four players online. As more vault hunters enter the fray, the visual phantasmagoria of color and explosions is amusing and strangely delightful. The game supports easy drop-in play, and options for independent level scaling and difficulty, smoothing out the hurdles facing players in different places in the game.

If the "bang" you want for your buck is simply a wealth of content and a lot to do, Gearbox has you covered. Beyond the potential for trying out different characters and builds through the lengthy sweep of the narrative, the post-game experience opens up a range of challenge options, tiers of mayhem-infused encounters to climb through, and rank increases to shoot for as you dive back into the action. I welcome the commitment to endgame engagement. However, I must add that in my own playthrough, I felt the core loop of combat wore out its welcome well before the credits rolled, especially since the highest available initial difficulty (normal) rarely mounted a meaningful challenge.

Borderlands 3 is a love letter to its fans and a celebration of the style of play it first popularized. Filled with characters from previous installments, and unapologetic in its silly humor and bombastic action, it's an amusing ride that seems hesitant to innovate. If more of what you loved before is your chief desire, Gearbox has granted that wish through a game of impressive scope that charts some very safe territory.

» **Matt Miller**

The PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions of Borderlands 3 feature 2-player local splitscreen cooperative play, which is not available on PC

GreedFall

Empowering choice

7.25

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
An action/RPG that delivers meaningful player choice for the story and character building, but struggles with polish and execution

» Graphics
GreedFall's environments are nicely detailed. The cityscapes are fascinating, even if interiors are repeated too often

» Sound
Olivier Deriviere's soundtrack is the best part of this experience. Combat encounters begin with a quiet rumble and eventually turn into a ruckus. Character voices are decent as a whole

» Playability
Hack-and-slash melee and spellcasting feel good, but enemy encounters don't offer enough variety. Fights can reset if you move too far in one direction in the open world

» Entertainment
GreedFall's writing is solid, and the player choice is fun to engage in, but the game needs polish and more meaningful action

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Focus Home Interactive **Developer** Spiders **Release** September 10 **Rating** M

The enemy troops outnumber mine three to one. Defeat is inevitable, and we have our backs to the wall with no escape in sight. In a last-ditch plea, I convince their leader to at least have the honor of felling me with a sword, and we exchange metal. He's no match for me and I gain the upper hand after a few well-placed strikes. My knife is now pressed firmly against his throat. I can set him free and try more diplomacy, but my best play may be spilling his blood to scare his troops into retreat.

This is a huge decision you are forced to make in GreedFall, a sprawling role-playing adventure that is grand in ambition, yet struggles to deliver in polished ways. Set amid a beautiful backdrop that combines a beast-filled fantasy setting with architecture inspired by 17th-Century European baroque art, GreedFall delivers a unique vibe, and it strives to make the player feel like they have a say in almost every event that unfolds. Player choices are handled exceptionally well, both in terms of how they affect the flow of the story and in pushing the player to sculpt their character with talents needed to enable more choice.

Some of the decisions are as black and white as "burn it down" or "leave it be," but most require talent rolls, such as having the charisma to bend someone's will. Developer Spiders delivers these talent rolls frequently, and they usually bring immediate benefits, even to world exploration. You need to invest in lockpicking to open doors and chests, agility and strength to wield specific weapons, willpower to harness the power of amulets, science to make bombs, and vigor to have the ability to balance, jump further, and climb specific surfaces. Every level gained makes your character more interesting and dynamic. Spiders does a phenomenal job with the RPG systems, which are deep, meaningful, and include scaling your character to equip better and rarer gear.

Carefully chosen player choice even extends to the companions you bring along, as the faction they support may be at odds with the NPC you are conversing with, and, without notice, your cohort could escalate a situation. Much like BioWare's games of old, you can get to know your companions and increase your standing with them just by talking to them, complete with unique quests that further the relationship. And yes, romancing them is an option. I like how my relationship with Aphra progressed and concluded, but I can't speak to how the other romances unfold.

GreedFall's world is broken up into sizable hubs that are nicely designed, and deliver plenty to explore if the player chooses to veer off of the beaten path. Chests are littered everywhere, as are side quests. As much fun as it is to uncover more of Teer Fradee, that means you have to engage in combat – GreedFall's troubled Achilles' heel. Not only are enemy types lacking (you battle the Valieg over and over), but encounters frequently glitch out, leading to strange stalemates. Most battles take place in open areas, giving you plenty of room to spread out and evade enemy attacks, as many will charge you. If you happen to pull an enemy too far from their starting point (and it could just be 10 feet in a specific direction), they lose track of you, walk slowly back to their default position, and gain all of their health back. For whatever reason, each encounter is set within a ring, but the player has no visual way to know where the boundaries are, making battles maddening at times.

Spiders did a nice job with the combat mechanics – swinging melee weapons and casting spells feels great, but the enemy rarely puts up a decent fight. Most of their attacks are far too easy to read, meaning you can dodge or parry them with ease. I found my character was far too powerful for the second half of the game, just from undertaking roughly 30 to 40 percent of the side quests and activities. Combat is something GreedFall desperately needed to get right, given how heavily quests often just consist of conversations and exploration, but it ends up being the worst part of the game.

Many of the quests are fairly vanilla in design, but are lifted up by strong writing, which sometimes moves into the realm of mini-stories used to flesh out characters or the world. I especially like the quests that are formatted like mysteries that push the player to search areas to unearth clues and communicate with witnesses to piece stories together. That said, it takes a fair bit of imagination to bring some of the tales to life since they mostly unfold through emotionless (and mostly animationless) characters. Some big story beats are scripted well, but most of this experience is just talking heads. Again, the stories GreedFall tells are quite good, but the production values are lacking.

GreedFall's stories, world, and wealth of choices are fun to explore and can legitimately be great at times, but the problematic combat, reliance on conversation for quests, and lack of polish over everything hold it back, but Spiders is on to something and isn't far off from having its first truly notable RPG. Much like Bethesda's early Elder Scrolls titles and CD Projekt Red's first Witcher game, GreedFall feels like it's the beginning of something great, but it just isn't quite there. » **Andrew Reiner**

Knights And Bikes

An adorable ride

Style 1 or 2-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Double Fine Presents **Developer** Foam Sword Games **Release** August 27 **Rating** E

8

PS4 • PC

» **Concept**
Ride bikes and make a friend! Along the way, uncover the secret of an ancient treasure and save adults from certain doom

» **Graphics**
Gorgeous art makes all of the characters and environments radiate a storybook vibe

» **Sound**
From the background music to the little effects, excellent sound design helps build a believable world

» **Playability**
Your available moves are easy to understand and execute, to the point that battles and puzzles feel routine before long

» **Entertainment**
Even when the action gets predictable, the charming presentation and small touches keep the sense of adventure alive

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

Knights and Bikes sends players back to when life was more magical. In this world, treasure maps are real, local legends come to life, and your bike is an extension of yourself. Though the game is set in the '80s, nostalgia for a specific era isn't the centerpiece; developer Foam Sword Games instead focuses on a more universal sense of turning back the clock. Knights and Bikes successfully captures child-like wonder and fun in an unabashedly wholesome adventure – with just the right amount of danger.

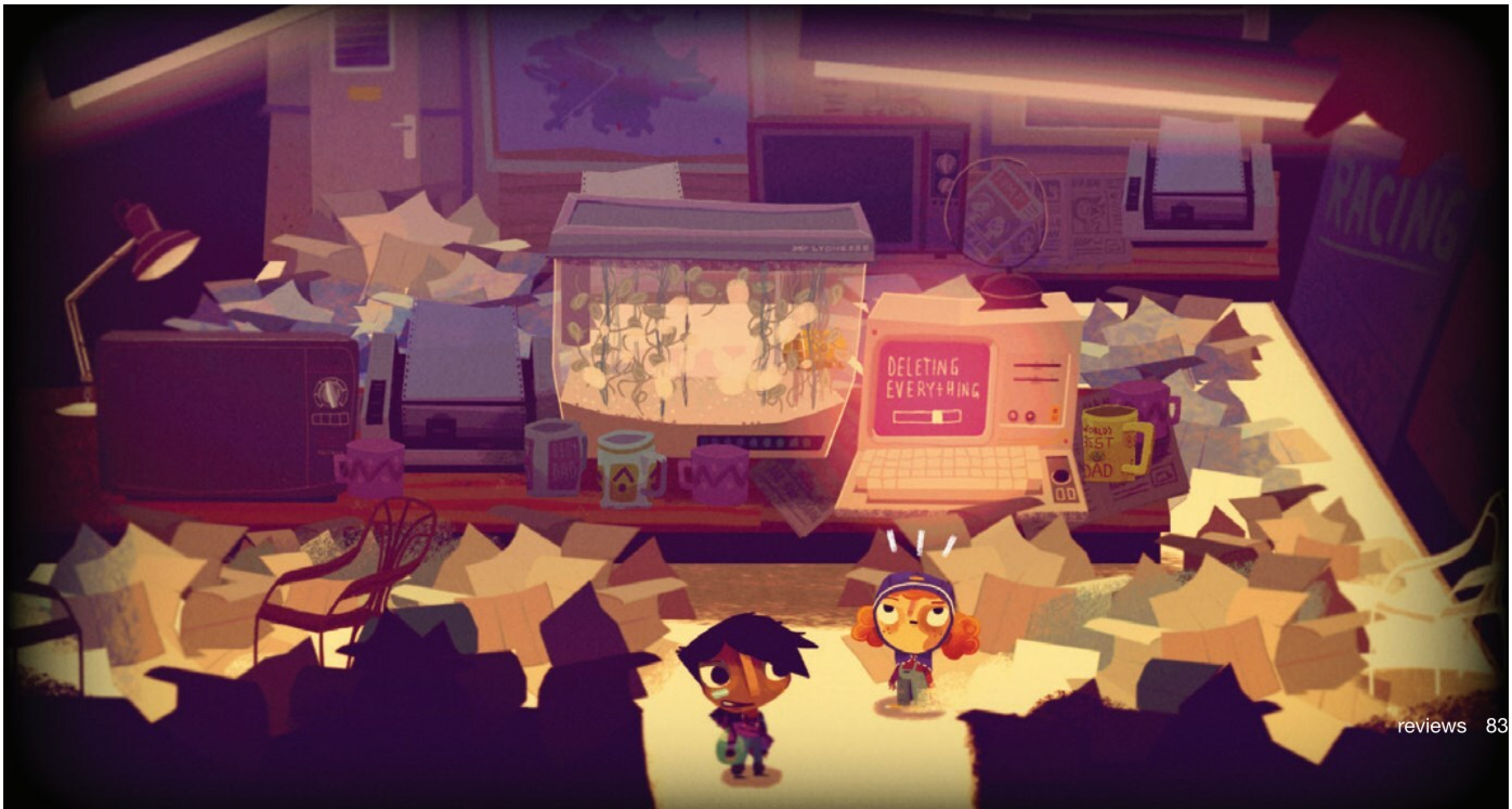
The tale follows Nessa and Demelza, two new acquaintances who build a friendship and search for treasure on the fictional island of Penfurzy. Though the setting seems quaint and sleepy on the surface, Nessa and Demelza learn about legendary knights, an ancient curse, and more during their travels. Even amid these fantastical developments, the emphasis remains on the two girls and their interactions, and that's what makes the experience so charming. They play video games together, sleep in sleeping bags, race each other, laugh, and argue. These moments stack up, building a relationship that feels authentic and even heartwarming, whether they're just biking through the woods or exploring an ancient quarry.

The journey progresses through a mixture of straightforward action and puzzle-solving. Each girl earns different abilities along the way, and if you're playing alone, you can swap between them at any time. You often need to alternate between Nessa and Demelza's powers to beat enemies or reach new areas. For example, Demelza's plunger-mines are the only way to take out shielded foes, and Nessa's blaring boombox clears cursed clouds from your path. This all works fine for solo players thanks to capable partner A.I., but to fully appreciate the sense of cooperation, you should recruit a friend or family member. That element of teamwork (and the occasional competitive minigame) is surprisingly helpful in reinforcing the budding friendship between the two heroes.

None of the situations are so demanding that they require skilled human assistance. On one hand, this simplicity suits the game's tone well; Knights and Bikes is easy to pick up for players of all skill levels, and no scenario is complex enough to become a serious roadblock. On the other hand, the encounters and obstacles grow tedious over time because they ask so little of you. Battles against possessed golf balls and gauntlets are cute at first, but don't involve enough skill or strategy to be interesting. And calling anything here a "puzzle" is a stretch, since minimal brainpower is needed to figure out how to clear the way forward. Standing on switches, turning on generators, and destroying blockades are recurring tasks.

Knights and Bikes could use more bite and variety to keep players engaged, but many other elements help make up for lost ground. The island of Penfurzy itself is a great setting, with gorgeous hand-painted visuals that give the tourist town (and the surrounding areas) a storybook quality. The supporting cast is also amusing, like the friendly bike shop owner and old librarian. These characters all have their moments and then exit gracefully; with the exception of the funny pet goose who follows the girls around, no one else steals the spotlight. The customizable bikes are another highlight, and I enjoyed applying new paints, flags, and faceplates. It's all just cosmetic, but also provides a personal connection to the game's most persistent and important mode of transportation.

The gameplay may not always grab your attention, but the clever writing, fun character designs, and great sound effects, ensure that your exploits in Penfurzy are memorable. Drawing on source material like *The Goonies* and *Stand By Me*, Knights and Bikes strikes an endearing balance between normal and strange; the line between reality and imagination may be blurry throughout Nessa and Demelza's quest, but at least you never have to sort it out alone. » **Joe Juba**



eFootball PES 2020

Fine margins

8

Style 1 to 8-Player Sports (Xbox One)(22-Player Online), 1 to 4-Player Sports (PS4, PC)(22-Player Online)
Publisher Konami **Developer** Konami **Release** September 10 **Rating** E

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Add small but noticeable touches to mainly gameplay and the Master League mode to create an experience that is both familiar and new

» **Graphics**
The Master League cutscenes show both how good the models are but also how hard it is to capture realistic facial expressions

» **Sound**
The crowd swells, but it doesn't add to the overall matchday atmosphere. There needs to be more vocal away support and back-and-forth between supporters

» **Playability**
The new way of controlling the ball with just the right analog is simple and useful

» **Entertainment**
PES 2020 creates a vibrant drama on and off the pitch through small details that can make a big difference

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

I'm halfway through my first season as manager of the club in PES 2020's Master League franchise mode and everything is going swimmingly – we're top of the league and leaders of our group in the European cup. At the beginning of the season I made a promise to our board that we could win both competitions, and we are well on our way.

Then, towards the end of the January transfer window, Paris Saint-Germain swoops in and pay the release clause of one of my best players. I hurriedly propose a new contract to him in the hopes of rebuffing the poachers, but his head has already been turned and he's out the door. Our domestic and continental campaigns continue nonetheless, but the loss of our star particularly hurts because I hadn't arranged a suitable replacement.

This is one of the scenarios in the mode, along with choosing season objectives and press conference answers, that plays out in new cutscenes without spoken dialog. The intrinsic value of something enigmatic like the pressure of an upcoming derby or the team selection is hard to measure, but it captures a hard-to-quantify quality that this often-sterile mode has lacked. Similarly, it's nice to finally see realistic transfer amounts although the A.I. still doesn't know how to manage rosters during the transfer windows. This is emblematic of the title as a whole, a game whose charms and flaws are both apparent.

PES 2020's gameplay changes can also be very noticeable (I play on Top Player difficulty) even if they don't seem monumental on paper. Players' physicality gives gameplay a measure of grit; even if a defender is in a good position they can be held off so a shot or pass can be completed. This, along with defense in general requiring more discerning timing, introduces tension and excitement around the box. Fouls still aren't consistently fair and collision sometimes fails, but I like the defending overall.

Timing is also important in passing and shooting, creating windows that separate the delicious from the merely ambitious. Some players have an inspire rating that causes teammates to make runs because they know your player has the ability to get them the ball – that's if you pick your head up and see their movement. There's also a difference between getting your body correctly set up to put the ball accurately on net and just swinging your leg at it and sending it into the stands. A less-than-ideal pass or one to the wrong teammate may slow your counterattack just enough to let the opposition gather its forces. Your striker may snatch at a chance that would have been a sure goal if you just took an extra second to get composed.

Relative to gameplay and Master League, PES 2020's online and MyClub aspects stand out less. Fantasy collection mode MyClub is still generous in how it gives fans starting out a chance at acquiring decent players, and I anticipate the title's post-launch outlay of agents and ways of accumulating GP, the in-game currency, to be the same as last year. Overall, online play is still at the mercy of players' connection, Konami's infrastructure, and the limited matchmaking model – which is to say it's not very different – but at least you can see your opponent's connection strength before diving into a match.

PES 2020's small details create moments that bring into focus the fine margins that determine the results of many soccer games. When compared to the game's similarities to last year it seems like minutia, but these are the things that elevate it from previous efforts and make PES 2020 look and feel correct. It's a better game, even if it's not evolved in every way. It's like when a manager expresses how pleased they are of the team after a draw: You know they wanted the outright win, but they are also satisfied with the team's overall performance. PES 2020 can be a familiar experience, but that shouldn't blind you to its finer moments. » **Matthew Kato**

NHL 20

Off the post

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (12-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Vancouver **Release** September 13 **Rating** E

WE ARE ALL CANUCKS
CCMHOCKEY.COM
BAUER
NHL20
VAPOR
CANUCKS

NHL 20 is that team that didn't make moves in the off-season beyond conditioning its current players and adding mid-tier free agents. After going big last year with a new skating and physics engine, NHL 20 dials back by focusing on refinements and smaller improvements. The result is better gameplay, but the changes – or in some cases the lack thereof – to the core modes leave much to be desired.

While not a complete reinvention, the overall gameplay looks and feels better than it ever has. The addition of contextual and star players' signature shots make all the difference. Not every player looks the same winding up a slapshot, and now players react more realistically, such as going down on one knee to snipe or leaning forward into the stick for more snapping power. This adds some much-needed variety to the on-ice action and makes setting up plays more fun. Everything feels more natural, especially one-timers and jamming the stick in scrums for the dirty goals. Although, in turn, I found scoring a lot easier than in past entries, leading to ridiculously high-scoring games.

One part that feels off is the checking; sometimes out of nowhere, players get a surge of momentum, allowing them to land hulking, unrealistic checks. I wish physicality factored more into board battles like real-life, an area that still needs work. Players' on-ice awareness also needs improvement; you still see them skating past pucks or reverting back to defense when they should be battling for the puck. Also, while I was impressed with the new goaltending animations that had them making acrobatic saves, I can't say the same for the goaltending A.I. itself. While goalies certainly follow the puck better, they still don't adjust to player tendencies, biting on the same moves repeatedly.

Everyone will invariably be attracted to different modes, but expect refinements rather than large-scale changes. Be A Pro players are once again left out in the dust with the mode being practically identical to last year and in desperate need of new life. EA Sports Hockey League also remains largely the same, with its player classes, traits, and specialties in need of new options. Unfortunately, this also means things like A.I. defensemen jumping into the play at inappropriate times.

This may seem disappointing, but a slew of other modes make smart-but-minor additions. Arcade-focused Ones includes couch co-op, allowing you to play as star NHL players against friends. Ultimate Team introduces squad battles, a single-player competitive mode where you compete against A.I.-controlled teams created by the HUT community, which give players an easier way to earn rewards. World of Chel adds new cosmetic items alongside weekly challenges to get special limited-time jerseys and hats (though it is still lacking compared to other games on the market).

The mode that got the biggest facelift is Franchise, where you pull the strings behind the scenes by taking on the role of general manager, forging a path to the Cup. You now have more ways to strategize by hiring coaches with their own systems and finding the right players to fit within it, or firing your coaching staff when it no longer works. I love the idea, but this mode is a mess and will probably take EA some time to iron out the kinks. Franchise's new trade finder is barely functional, most of the time turning up nothing or lackluster deals. Signing coaches is the most frustrating process, as they're extremely picky if your franchise isn't 100-percent ideal, requiring you to throw money at them, and even then, they sometimes cannot be swayed.

To Franchise's credit, the player readiness category in scouting is extremely helpful for planning future rosters. Also, players asking for appropriate compensation for contracts based on their stats and the season they're having is a welcome improvement. The mode no doubt needed a shakeup, and the ideas are promising, I just wish it was in better shape.

NHL 20 is an uneven experience. One minute I'd feel the high of setting up an awesome play and seeing the puck land in the back of the net, but then I'd slam my stick into the ice frustrated by disappointing aspects across its modes. Seeing similar issues continually bleed over year after year is getting harder to forgive the longer they go on, but it's still the only way you can really experience the thrill of being on the ice, and at the very least, it captures that well.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

7.5

PS4 • Xbox One

» **Concept**
Build upon last year's new skating engine by making plays and shots look and feel more realistic while refining many popular modes

» **Graphics**
Not much has changed in this department through the years, but the new shot and goaltending animations are impressive. More real-world likeness for star players would go a long way

» **Sound**
The commentary gets a much-needed change-up thanks to new duo James Cybulski and Ray Ferraro taking the helm. The pair add new energy and life to the on-ice action

» **Playability**
The game certainly plays better than NHL 19, but many modes lack the upgrades they so desperately need

» **Entertainment**
NHL 20 gives hockey fans plenty of ways to have fun and invest their time, but there are a few disappointments along the way

» **Replay Value**
High

Gears 5

Holding the line

8.5

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1 to 3-Player Shooter (10-Player Online) **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios **Developer** The Coalition **Release** September 10 **Rating** M

Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
More of the Gears you know, but done up in big and dramatic ways. The open-world sequences don't work, but making the robot helper more useful is a game-changer

» **Graphics**
That larger-than-life body armor is the same, but the lighting and atmospheric conditions are eye-popping

» **Sound**
Along with familiar character voices returning, the new characters are beautifully brought to life by their actors

» **Playability**
The gunplay and cover mechanics remain exceptional, but the vehicular segments just don't deliver much excitement

» **Entertainment**
Gears 5 delivers plenty of excitement in its encounters and story, and offers nearly endless thrills in its excellently crafted multiplayer experiences

» **Replay Value**
High

The Gears of War series has been uncompromising in its apocalyptic vision, holding the line with the same cover-based shooting, gruff armor-clad heroes, and wealth of multiplayer modes in all of its installments. You know exactly what you are getting from each game, and that's a great thing. Gears 5 continues this tradition, and is every bit as fun as it is familiar. The gunplay feels somewhat antiquated, especially when the Lancer's chainsaw roars to life again, but that doesn't stop The Coalition from delivering some of the series' biggest and most intense firefights. When the conflicts escalate, look out – Gears has never been better.

This is The Coalition's second tour of duty with the Gears license, and the developer shows savviness with both the lore and gunplay, dazzling with the latter in bombastic ways – especially in the final act, which is relentless in its pacing and action. The Coalition also takes a few chances to expand Gears of War out of its comfort zone, and the results are mixed. Some ideas add strategic layers to combat, others bring the action to a screeching halt.

Gears 5 is a direct continuation of its predecessor; it doesn't skip a beat in picking up the narrative thread that was teased at the end of Gears of War 4. Protagonist Kait Diaz's dark secret was exposed, and now she and her teammates have to come to terms with what it means. Can Kait still be trusted? The Coalition toys with this question, and periodically shows flashes of conflict with Kait, but not enough. While we get definite answers as to what happens to her, this fascinating plot point is rarely entertained and ends up fizzling out.

That's not to say the story is a complete loss. It delivers engaging moments in unexpected ways – mostly through robots. One of these characters (who I won't name here) is among the series' most fascinating and well-spoken, taking the player on a tour through a mesmerizing Frankenstein-like lab filled with grotesque wonders. The relationship between Marcus Fenix, his son James, and the other returning faces is also handled well, and delivers a few legitimate laughs (and plenty of groan-inducing lines as well).

One of this game's brightest spots is the return of one of Gears' unsung heroes, JACK, a hovering robot that is always there with a solution

for the team, both for the narrative and gameplay. JACK is an absolute game-changer for combat (and can even be controlled manually in co-op play). With the press of a button, the player can order Jack to do a variety of things, such as flash-bang a group of enemies or provide a protective shield, just like a bastion. He can even grab ammo and guns for you. As you explore the world, you find upgrade items for JACK's abilities, making it well worth your time to veer off of the beaten path.

The Coalition does a nice job of changing up the pace of combat, even though every arena is littered with waist-high cover. Along with a few great new enemies to fill with lead, wind is again used in clever ways to make players think twice about throwing grenades. I also love how ice can be shot out to send enemies into a frozen drink or to create a temporary safety zone (the latter technique is also used effectively on a Horde mode map).

The one area where Gears 5 stumbles is through the introduction of two open-world sections – one in the tundra, and another in a desert with red sand. To explore these massive spaces, the player pilots a skiff that is pulled along by a sail. This vehicle looks cool and the world it rips across is beautifully detailed, but all you do is drive from point A to point B. Even when undertaking side missions, you don't engage in combat on the skiff. If you are playing co-op, the people who aren't driving have nothing meaningful to do. They just sit there until the journey ends. This lifeless open-world exploration doesn't work and drags the experience down.

When Gears 5 is in classic form, it pumps out excitement. Horde mode is as thrilling as ever, offering 12 maps, tough waves of enemies (especially those with leeches, a wild new foe that might have the best sound design in the series), and distinct hero traits to alter the flow from match to match. Horde is once again a satisfying marathon; my first 50-wave win took roughly two hours. Most waves take a serious effort by every player, once again making this mode one of the best examples of cooperative play out there.

Horde and the campaign are joined by a fun-yet-odd cooperative experience called Escape. The goal of this mode is for three players to work their way through an enemy complex as quickly as possible. If they engage in a firefight for too long, a slowly creeping gas eventually consumes them. The final seconds of Escape are great, as the three players unload everything they have left to stop enemies passing through slowly closing doors – but the excitement isn't always at that peak, and the thrills are fleeting. Escape is a fun little diversion to hit up from time to time, but isn't going to steal me away from Horde mode.

The Coalition is making it easier for new players to spend time in Versus mode, which has always been excellent, but maybe a little too competitive and stressful for new recruits to jump right into. Along with ranked matches, which is likely where the veterans will reside, The Coalition added something called "Arcade," which is a battle to 50 kills. Every kill and assist rewards the player with skulls that can be exchanged at any time for better weapons. Players can also switch between characters (who have unique perks) at any time. Bigger guns, no limits – the idea works, and ends up being an absolute blast, even if it isn't quite as clever as Arms Race (which is still Gears' best mode).

Just don't expect to see a pure Gears multiplayer experience at launch. Having Sarah Connor, a Terminator, and Halo: Reach's Emile-A239 and Kat-B320 available as DLC characters on day one is a strange decision. These licensed characters were in most of my matches, which is distracting if you're trying to embrace all things Gears right out of the gates. On the plus side, player progression and rewards are handled much better this time around – just play the game, rank up, and watch the cards and supplies fly in.

Gears 5 is exactly what it needs to be. This old war vet still packs a punch. The open-world exploration has issues, but that isn't enough to steal away the thunder The Coalition expertly deploys on the battlefield. The campaign is a fun ride that concludes with a shocker moment and a hell of a setup for a sequel. I'm already looking forward to that follow-up. » **Andrew Reiner**

The Legend Of Zelda: Link's Awakening

A dream come true

9

gameinformer GOLD

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Nintendo
Developer Nintendo, Grezza **Release** September 20 **Rating** E

Switch

» Concept
Bring a classic Zelda game to the Switch in a lovingly faithful remake that can stand confidently among its contemporaries

» Graphics
Incredible depth-of-field effects build the illusion that you're peering at a living diorama, even though some slowdown occasionally creeps in

» Sound
Classic tunes have been given the same treatment as the visuals, bringing a grandeur to the music that wasn't possible in the Game Boy era

» Playability
Frequently used items like Link's sword and shield get dedicated buttons, reducing the amount of time you spend swapping things around in menus

» Entertainment
Link's Awakening was home to some of the best classic-era dungeon designs and bosses in the series, and this remake is a reminder of (or introduction to) its legacy

» Replay Value
Moderately high

The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening was one of the strangest games in a series filled with outliers. Its playful nature and cameos from other Nintendo franchises certainly helped cement that status, but that's only part of the story. Strip away its playful veneer and you're still left with one of the strongest entries in terms of dungeon design and boss battles. Now, 26 years after its original release, Nintendo has remade Link's first portable adventure for the Switch. The result beautifully captures the essence of the Game Boy original while adding some quality-of-life upgrades to bring it up to contemporary standards.

The most striking thing about the new version of Link's Awakening is how it feels simultaneously fresh and familiar. The remake forgoes the original's screen-by-screen overworld navigation in favor of smooth-scrolling exploration, but the placement of every tree, house, and buried seashell is right where it was back in the day.

Rather than trying to recreate the sprites from the original version or making them adhere to the same presentation in A Link Between Worlds, Nintendo started from scratch in an unexpected way. It looks as though you're engaging with a tiny plastic diorama; characters have a glossy sheen, and there's an exaggerated depth-of-field effect that reinforces the illusion. It's delightful, and it perfectly matches the story's whimsical tone. This is, after all, a game where you help a goat and SimCity's Mr. Wright cultivate a pen-pal relationship. The dialogue is as snappy as ever, with fourth-wall-breaking moments that still hold up today.

Of course, charm alone only goes so far. As I played through Link's Awakening again, I was repeatedly struck by how wonderfully designed the experience is. Koholint's overworld isn't the largest that players have explored in the series – not by a long shot – but you really get the sense of how carefully the original creators managed every single pixel. For every time I had to backtrack, it seemed as though I was opening up a new shortcut, finding a satisfying new use for an item I'd just earned, or discovering a fun secret.

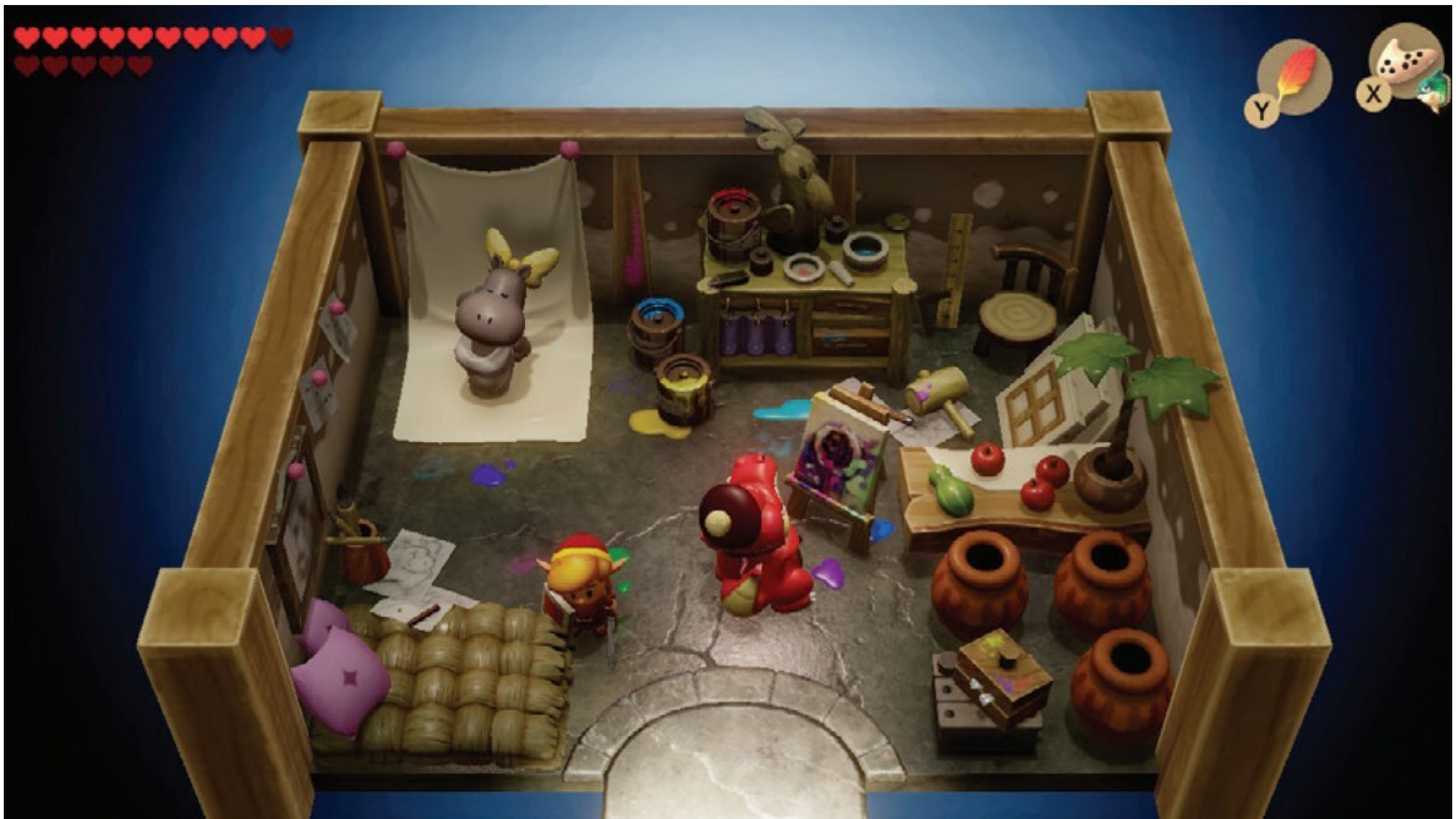
I adored the original release, but it was definitely a product of its time. The Game Boy didn't overwhelm players with an abundance of buttons, which meant that you ended up spending a fair amount of time selecting items in menus. I still had to pop into those menus with the remake, but having dedicated buttons for sprinting, blocking, and swinging Link's sword minimizes the shuffling, so it isn't terribly annoying.

The remake is a faithful retelling of the original, but there are a few other updates. Most notably, the gravedigger Dampé appears with a new dungeon-designing tool. As you play through dungeons, you unlock tiles that you can place to create your own Zelda dungeons. It's a neat idea, but I didn't find it particularly engaging. Most of the tiles that are available to you are pulled from dungeons you've already cleared. I appreciate the effort, but it isn't something I'm drawn toward in the long term.

Perhaps my dissatisfaction with the dungeon-creating tools is because the official ones are so great. I was surprised to see that many of the solutions and moments stayed with me decades after I last played through them. Not only did I remember so much, but it's all aged so beautifully – whether I was lugging a wrecking ball around to smash a series of load-bearing pillars or battling a maniacal genie and his various forms. Puzzles are clever without seeming too obscure, and the solutions deliver a nice sense of satisfaction.

Link's Awakening has always held a special place in my heart, but asking someone to go back to the original release is tough. With this remake, people don't have any excuses for not playing through one of the best (and strangest) entries. I envy those of you who will be experiencing this for the first time, though revisiting it all these years later is still an absolute pleasure.

» Jeff Cork



World Of Warcraft Classic

Not just nostalgia

gameinformer GOLD

Style MMORPG **Publisher** Blizzard **Developer** Blizzard **Release** August 27 **Rating** T

9

PC

» Concept
Explore the World of Warcraft as it was 15 years ago

» Graphics
WoW's original art style and models hold up admirably

» Sound
Inspired voices and a stirring soundtrack keep you engaged through every zone and dungeon

» Playability
While not as easy to get into as current WoW, you can still see how this game brought accessibility to the then-niche world of MMOs

» Entertainment
World of Warcraft shows why it was – and remains – the MMO to beat, with an enthralling world and satisfying sense of progression

» Replay Value
High

World of Warcraft has truly withstood the test of time. With WoW Classic, players can visit the title as it once was, without any of the daily quests, group-finding features, or streamlined leveling. In WoW Classic, you earn everything you obtain, and it makes every green item drop and crafting material feel like something special. While some aspects of the game feel their age and make you long for the changes that came in later iterations, the heart of Blizzard's legendary MMO still beats strong.

Meaningful progression in all its forms is the core of WoW Classic. Picking up a new blue item can double or triple your efficiency and make you feel like a god. Crafting and professions, which have been relegated to the realm of uselessness in the last decade of modern WoW, are important and essential; every scrap of cloth and every chunk of ore go into creating massive upgrades you show off in the main cities or sell to other players. Spending a day farming cloth to make a 12-slot bag to carry around your stuff is a lengthy-yet-rewarding chore, and winning a boss loot roll in a dungeon can change your reality for hours to come.

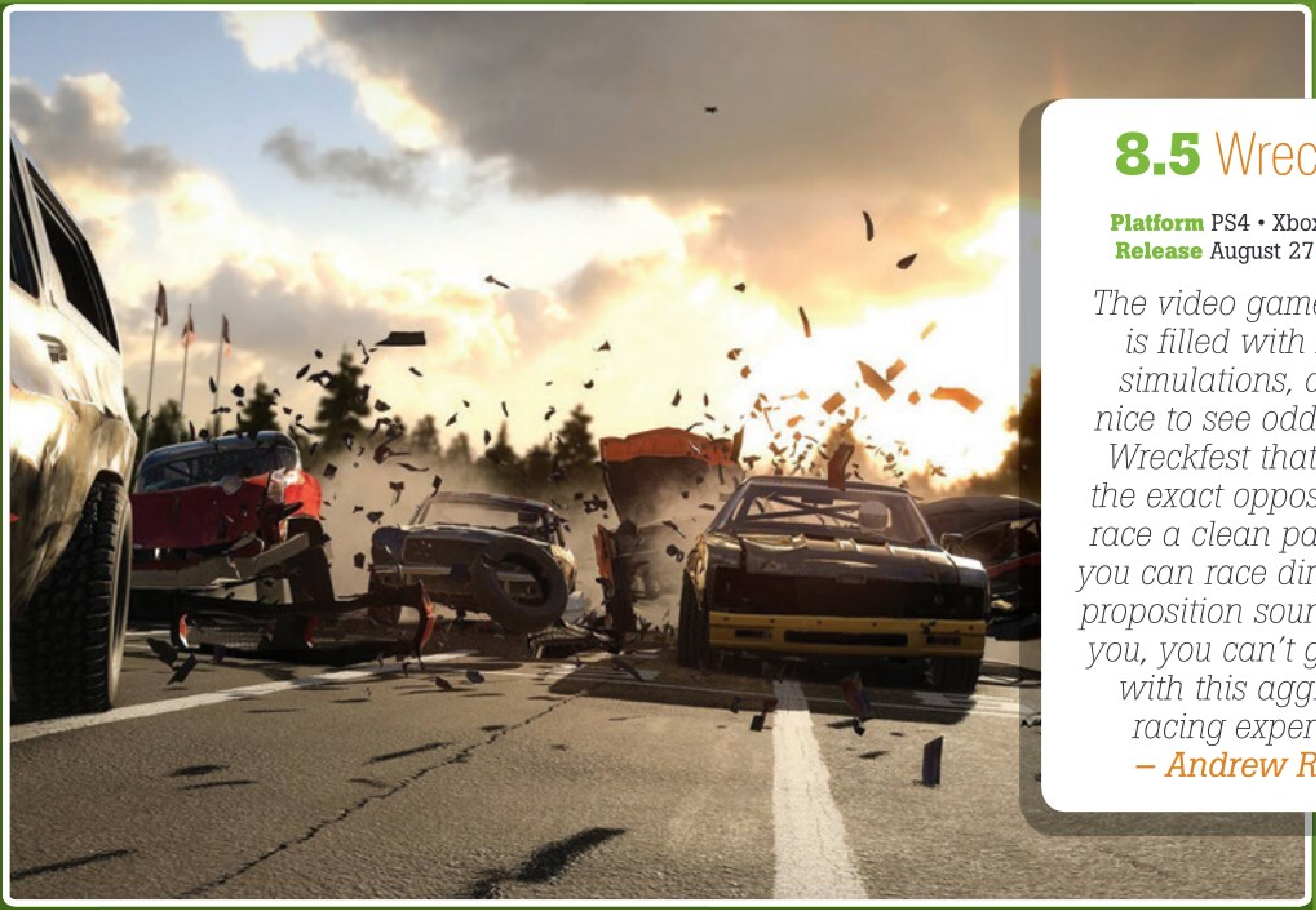
Entering a new zone for the first time conveys a sense of awe, exploring the haunted graveyards of Duskwood or the barren wasteland of Desolace. Socializing with other players is a must, since you won't be able to do any serious quests or dungeons without them. Elsewhere in today's gaming landscape, every interaction has been reduced to nothing to combat potential toxicity and streamline gameplay. Here, talking to other people, even if it's just a "hello," feels almost alien – and refreshing.

While most everything holds up incredibly well after the years, WoW Classic's quest design does not. You're often tasked with becoming a menial mailman, delivering various items all over the world, one after another, for a smidgen of experience. Without the benefit of flying mounts (or even mounts, until you're rich enough to afford one), this is a boring and arduous proposition. Quests don't even come close to getting the job done for your experience needs either, so expect to grind plenty during lulls in killing 10 raptors or bandits. You can dull the farming fatigue a bit by picking up profession skills that make your time slaughtering foes in droves valuable, but you're still going to want another monitor running Netflix to catch up on some new seasons while you whack away at monster after monster. Dungeons too feel the wear and tear of time, featuring endless enemies with little variation and boss battles devoid of any real mechanics.

WoW Classic is far more than a historical novelty, and the incredible design shines through even today. It may seem odd to play an MMO, a genre that hinges on the constant promise of an evolving future, with an ostensibly finite lifespan as updates take us to where WoW ended before the Burning Crusade, but WoW Classic proves that there's so much to be experienced in that journey. With WoW Classic available to anyone with a WoW subscription, it's an adventure worth taking – whether again or for the first time. » **Daniel Tack**

Launching Like It's 2004

Some aspects to consider with WoW Classic – if you're playing on several of the more popular servers, you may have to wait in a queue to hop on and play. Some critical quest NPCs or monsters may be highly sought after, depending on your server and zone, and may take forever to engage with. Even something as simple as collecting troll ears may end up taking hours, as tons of players are attempting to complete the quest at the same time, making every kill a contest. This will vary quite a bit depending on what server you're on and when you play, but that's the other side of playing in a world with thousands of other people all trying to do the same thing.



8.5 Wreckfest

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release August 27 **Rating** T

The video game market is filled with racing simulations, and it's nice to see oddities like Wreckfest that deliver the exact opposite. Why race a clean path when you can race dirty? If that proposition sounds fun to you, you can't go wrong with this aggressive racing experience.
– Andrew Reiner

5.5 Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey

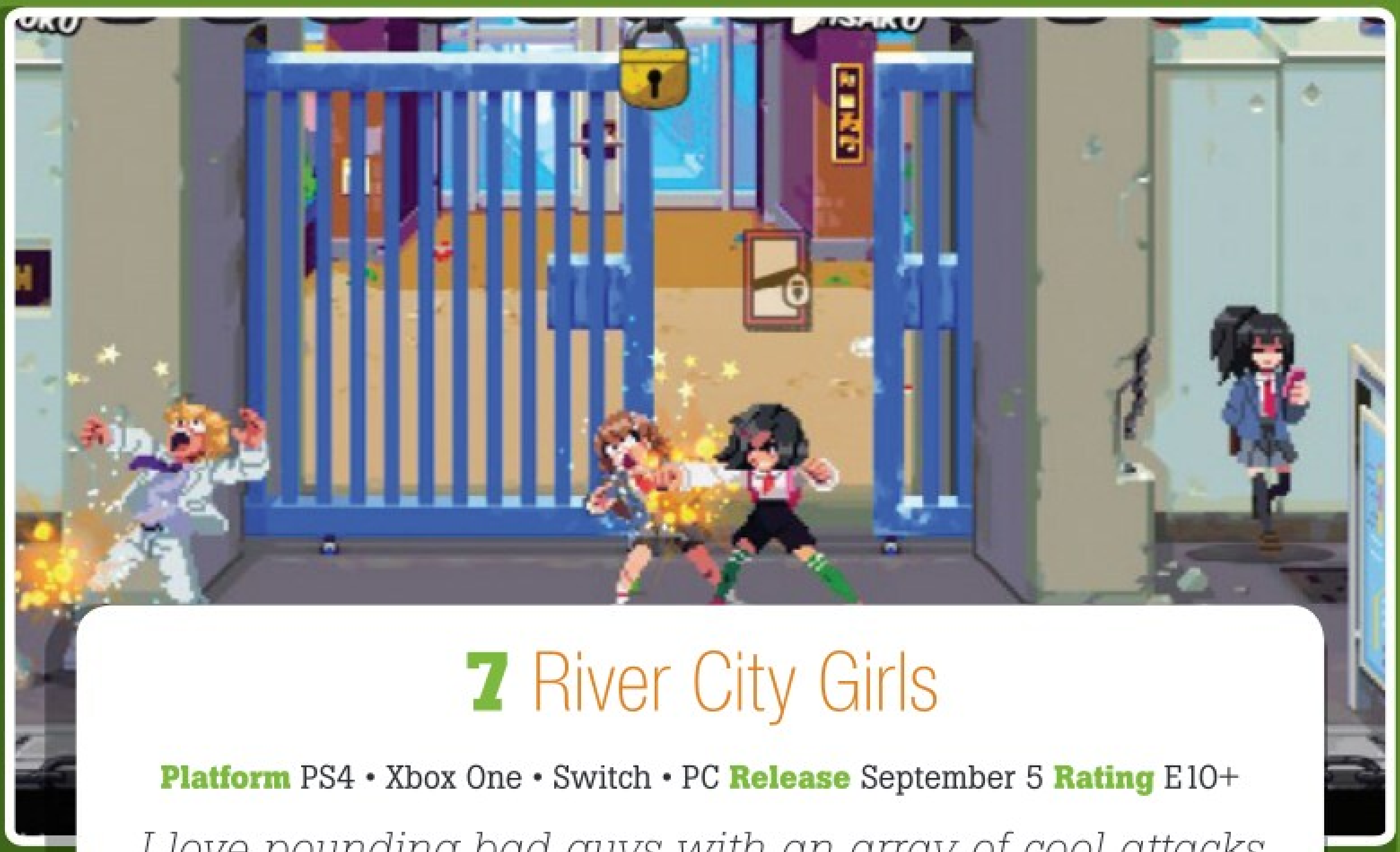
Platform PC **Release** August 27 **Rating** T

As a simulation, it creates rare moments of discovery and reflection about the miracle of life. As a game, it collapses under the weight of history, the ambition of its own concept, and a gameplay model that offers too little reward at the cost of far too much frustration and routine. – Matt Miller

7 NASCAR Heat 4

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release September 13 **Rating** E10+

NASCAR Heat 4's A.I. is a work in progress, the career mode is adequate, and the online suite is behind the times. Nevertheless, it's the best offering to date even if it's not totally dialed in, forcing you to get up on that steering wheel and dig deep for your spot on the track.
– Matthew Kato



7 River City Girls

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **Release** September 5 **Rating** E10+

I love pounding bad guys with an array of cool attacks and inventive weapons, even if I feel robbed by cheap tricks. River City Girls' chaotic battles are entertaining, but they're surrounded by an array of decisions that add more inconvenience than challenge. – Joe Juba

7 Blair Witch

Platform Xbox One • PC **Release** August 30 **Rating** M

Navigating this world is more tiresome than frightening, especially once you realize that you're not in peril most of the time. Instead, it's more about how creepy you find wooden stick figures and walking around in the dark.
– Jeff Cork

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Going Back To School

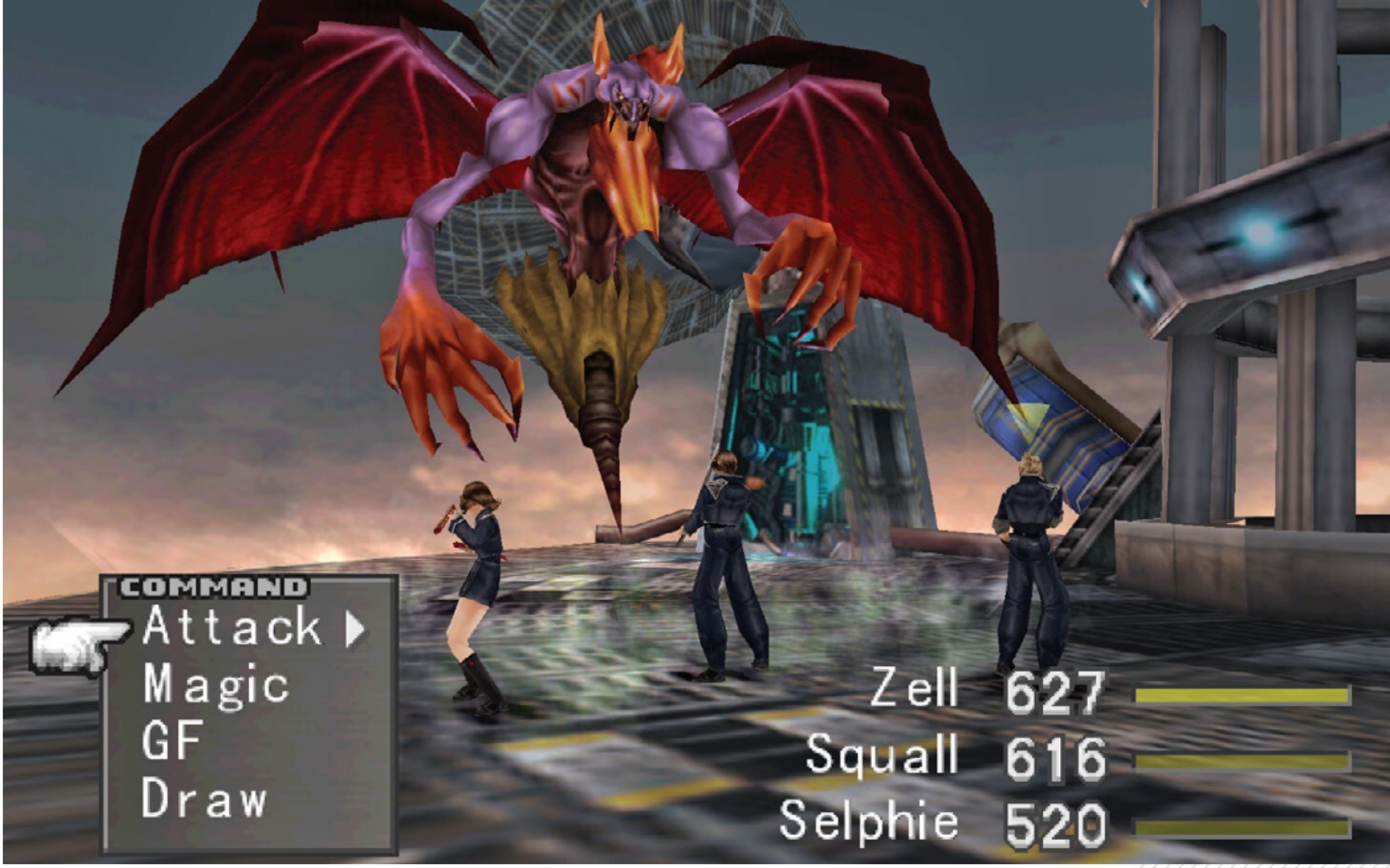
The stories behind Final Fantasy VIII

by Joe Juba

Every installment of Final Fantasy experiments and innovates in various ways, but when Final Fantasy VIII released in 1999, no entry had ventured so far outside of the series' traditional formula. Instead of seasoned heroes, the story follows a group of young students. Instead of stylized art, the visuals are more realistic. Instead of learning spells and casting them, players stock magic like items and "junction" them to improve various stats.

For players who were expecting familiar Final Fantasy plot points and systems, these changes were a surprise, and resulted in some split opinions among series fans when the game launched. But wherever you land on that spectrum, everyone can agree: Final Fantasy VIII is different. That willingness to take risks is also what makes the game so special, giving rise to a narrative that jumps between generations, a complex progression system that encourages players to test its limits, and the addictive Triple Triad card game that has appeared in multiple entries since.

The recent release of Final Fantasy VIII Remaster gives fans the opportunity to see this 20-year-old title in a new light – and some players are experiencing the adventure now for the first time. With this unique game back in the spotlight, we asked director Yoshinori Kitase (now producer on Final Fantasy VII Remake) about his behind-the-scenes stories from the time he spent working on this classic RPG that was ahead of its time.

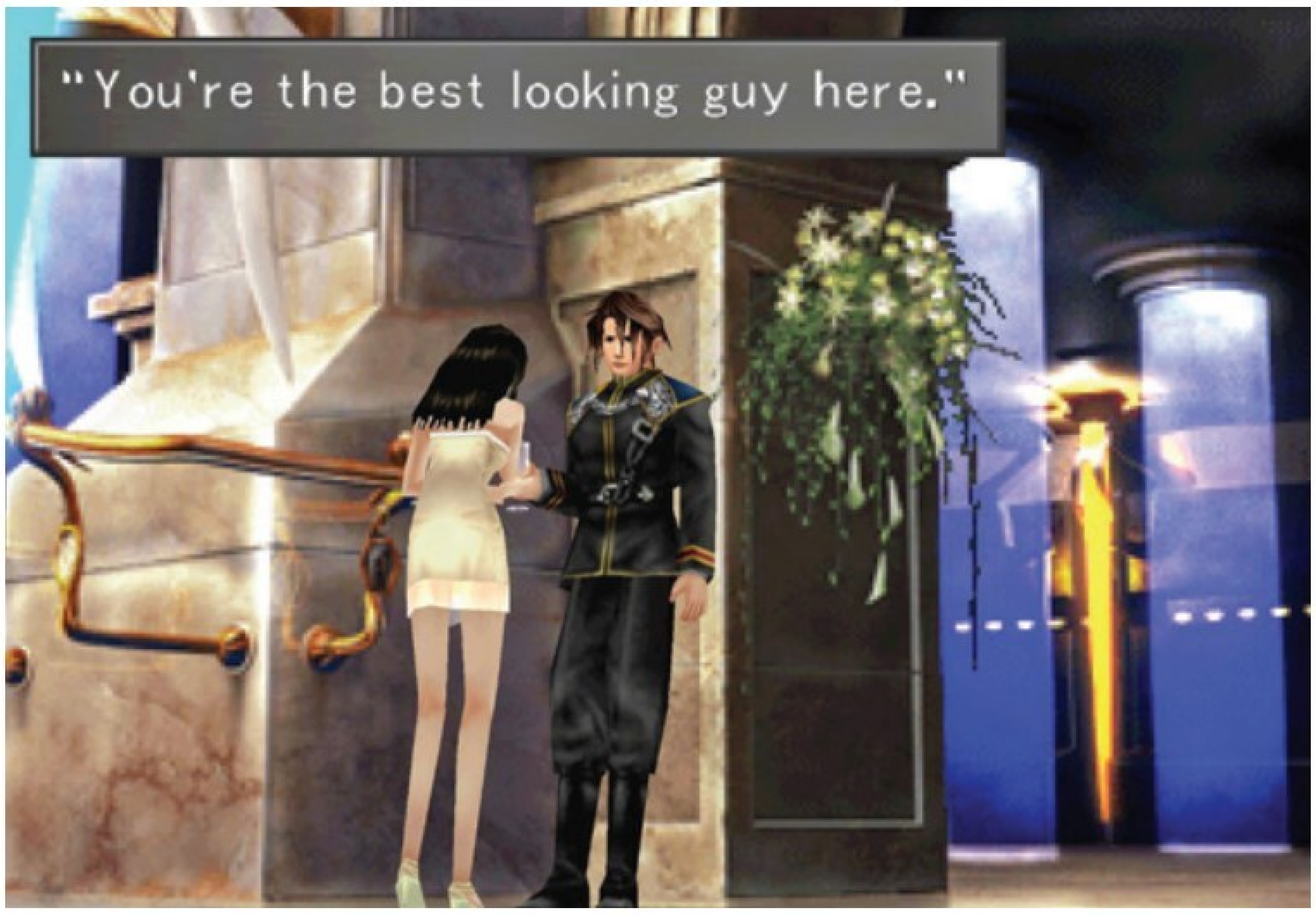


At the beginning of the Final Fantasy VIII project, what were the core concepts for the game that the team hoped to build on?
I'm not sure if you could really call this a "concept," but Final Fantasy VII was quite visually dark, and it was also a very serious, heavy story. From the very get-go, we wanted to make Final Fantasy VIII something much lighter in both visuals and tone. When we sat down to think about what would make a lighter and happier story, we thought about our days as students. I don't know if everybody had a good time being a student – maybe not everybody did – but when I sat down with [Tetsuya] Nomura-san to hash this out, we thought, "Actually, yeah, a story about kids in school would be a nice, cheerful story to go with."

Was there any concern among the team about following up a game as successful as Final Fantasy VII?
I didn't really feel like it had been such a wildly successful game. It just felt like more people the world over had a chance to play it – not just in Japan. So there wasn't any pressure to make Final Fantasy VIII as successful or anything specifically like that, but there was definitely a sense of wanting to make a game that would be appealing to people around the world.

Final Fantasy VIII made some pretty big changes to the Final Fantasy formula, like stocking magic and junctioning. Do you remember being worried about how fans would respond to that?
As far as the junctions, it wasn't really something we were worried about. Of course, people had things to say once the game came out! While we were making it, we weren't really thinking about it. But it was the first time we had done a school-drama story; up until then, it had always been something about a hero or a savoir or something like that. So were a little bit cautious about how that would be received.

At the time when Final Fantasy VII came out, it wasn't like everybody had the internet. We didn't really have any way to find out those reactions to the game except the reviews that were written about the game and fan letters that got sent to us. But up until then, all RPGs had pretty much been "Defeat the monster, you get some money, you get some experience points, and you level up." It was just a continuation over and over again. Within those letters and opinions we saw [about Final Fantasy VII], there were a number of people saying, "Isn't it time for something new? We'd like a new system." So rather than something we felt unsure about or cautious about, we just really wanted to try something new and give it a go.


"You're the best looking guy here."

Is that a philosophy you've carried over in the Final Fantasy titles you've worked on since? They all seem to take different risks with the series' traditions.
Yes, it is something that I'm constantly conscious of. We have meetings every month where all the teams present to each other what they are working on and how far they are and things like that. As an icebreaker at one of these meetings, I decided to do a little presentation where I went through and asked the people that have been involved in the Final Fantasy series, "What is Final Fantasy?" When I asked Tetsuya Nomura what Final Fantasy was to him, he said it was like someone had spilled a children's toybox all over the floor – meaning that a toybox is full of all of these things that are individually fun to play with, but when you throw them all over the floor, you can do anything anywhere. There are so many different things to engage with and look at and play with, and that's kind of how I think of it.

When Final Fantasy VIII came out, I loved it. But I also had arguments with friends who did not. What was your perception of how the game was received by fans at launch?
Final Fantasy VIII sold very well, and in that sense, it was successful. But as far as reviews at the time went, they were kind of all over the place. They were very mixed. For example, up until then, if you defeated a monster, you got money. But in Final Fantasy VIII, we decided to give players salaries, so after a certain period of time passes, they get money. There were definitely people who weren't happy about that, because it wasn't what they expected or were prepared for it to be. But equally, I thought it would present a new appeal for people. Like I said, we didn't have internet at the time, but now we can see what people are saying about the game online and a lot of fans have said – as far as the draw system and juctioning go – that it takes some time to get into it, but once you do, it's really fun. So I think we managed to present something new and appealing. Even now on forums, if I see posts titled something like "Actually, Final Fantasy VIII was pretty good," I'll go look at it. [Laughs] Like, "This person knows what's up!"

Do you think Final Fantasy VIII was treated fairly in those reviews?
The Japanese media wasn't particularly harsh about anything – they're not very outspoken about these sorts of things. And we didn't do a media tour for Final Fantasy VIII, so if there were reviews like that in the Western territories, we didn't really come face-to-face with them. At the time, it was really hard for players to get information about how to play the game or what strategies to use unless you had a strategy guide. I think if the game had come out when there were really strong internet communities, there could have been more sharing of information among players about how to do this and that, and it might have had a slightly different perception. I think that's something that it lacked a little bit, because there really wasn't a way to effectively convey these new elements to players.

The opening movie is still talked about as one of the best beginnings to a game. What kind of planning went into putting that together?
That was almost entirely the product of [Tetsuya] Nomura-san. He came up with the concept and said, "I want to do this," drew out a storyboard for us, and directed the scene as well. In Japan, there's a tradition of "morning practice." So if you're in a club activity, which is usually sports or something like that, you have practice before school starts in the morning. That scene, it has this whole build-up where it looks like a battle, but you find out actually it was just morning practice.

The gunblade is such an iconic weapon from this game. Is the origin as simple as someone just saying, "Wouldn't it be cool if we put a gun and sword together?"
Nomura-san does all of the character designs. And when he designs

characters, he also designs weapons, and that was the weapon that he designed. It was in his head somewhere – I have no idea where it came from. At first I just thought it would be a thing that could be both a blade and a gun. When he explained to me that actually, no, it was adding to the strength – when it comes down, it has the extra force of a gun to it – that made a lot more sense. I think it would have been pretty lame if it had just shot bullets, but having that extra force was a pretty cool idea.

Triple Triad was the first minigame in the series that spanned the whole game, rather than being a one-off event. How did its role in Final Fantasy VIII begin?
This time around, I wanted to make a minigame that was persistent throughout the entire world and could be played anywhere. At the time, Magic: The Gathering had just come out and was very popular, so we thought, "Rather than add a card game as a minigame, what if we added in a card game that all of the people in the world played? Some sort of tradition or cultural element that had been carried on from years past?" And we thought by adding that, it would add to the development of the world. We also wanted to add elements like, when you play Magic with your friends, you might trade cards so you both have better decks. Even with regular playing cards, say there's some sort of a game I play here, but the rules I have are different from the rules someone in Osaka might have. Adding elements like that makes it seem more realistic.

So when the time came to design the rules, did you pick someone on the team and say, "Hey, design a whole card game!"
Yes! It was developed by [Takayoshi] Nakazato-san, who works at Luminous Productions now, but at the time he was the planner for Final Fantasy VIII. We had him in charge of the battle systems, so there was absolutely zero plan for him to do the card game. But one day I called him in and said, "Could you do this?" He did.

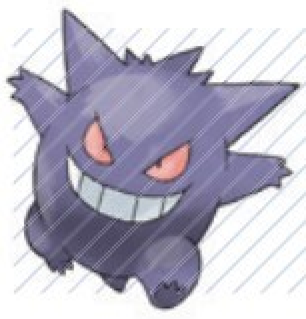
Fans have discovered assets and data for scenes featuring Laguna that were cut from the original. What was originally planned for those sequences?
I honestly can't remember much about the scenes that got cut, but I do seem to remember that, when we were first making the game, there was supposed to be about the same volume of story for Laguna as there was for Squall. In the end, Squall's story became the main one, but originally they were supposed to kind of be parallels of each other with the same amount of content. Because it ended up focused on Squall, a lot of the scenes with Laguna got cut.

If you could go back and change one thing about the original game, what would it be?
There's this scene where Squall and Rinoa are talking at Fisherman's Horizon, and I don't remember what the conversation was about exactly, but Rinoa says something kind of sassy to Squall, and he throws his hand at her. She dodges, but even at the time, [Kazushige] Nojima-san was like, "He shouldn't be hitting her. It's really not good to have a guy hitting a girl." Looking back, I wish I could change that.

Final Fantasy VIII Remaster is available now on PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC

The Scariest And Creepiest Entries In The Pokédex

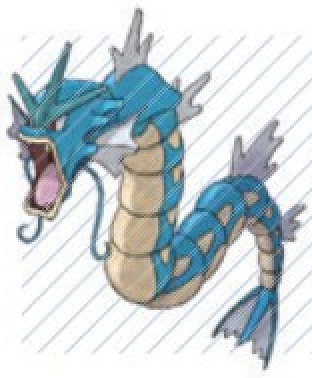
So, you wish Pokémon were real? Maybe reading these creepy facts from the various Pokémon games will make you think twice. **by Brian Shea**



#94 Gengar

Pokémon Sun

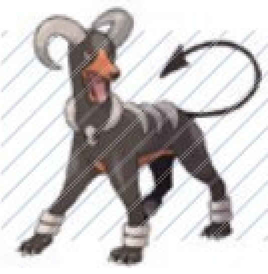
Should you feel yourself attacked by a sudden chill, it is evidence of an approaching Gengar. There is no escaping it. Give up.



#130 Gyarados

Pokémon Emerald

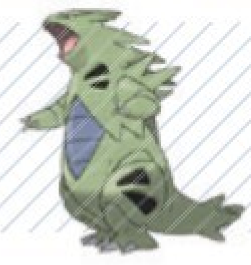
It is an extremely vicious and violent Pokémon. When humans begin to fight, it will appear and burn everything to the ground with intensely hot flames.



#229 Houndoom

Pokémon Gold

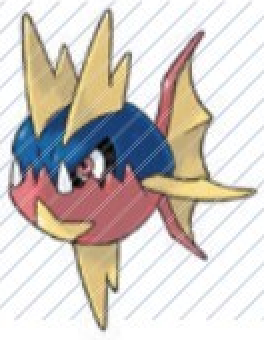
If you are burned by the flames it shoots from its mouth, the pain will never go away.



#248 Tyranitar

Pokémon Black and White

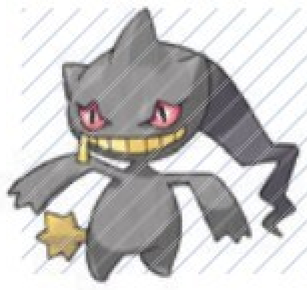
If it rampages, it knocks down mountains and buries rivers. Maps must be redrawn afterward.



#318 Carvanha

Pokémon Ruby

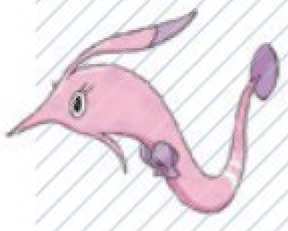
Carvanha's strongly developed jaws and its sharply pointed fangs pack the destructive power to rip out boat hulls. Many boats have been attacked and sunk by this Pokémon.



#354 Banette

Pokémon Ultra Sun

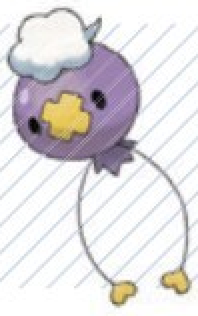
It's a stuffed toy that was thrown away and became possessed, ever searching for the one who threw it away so it can exact its revenge.



#368 Gorebyss

Pokémon Ultra Moon

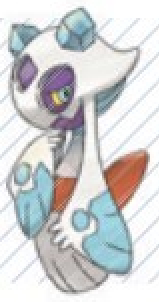
It sucks bodily fluids out of its prey. The leftover meat sinks to the seafloor, where it becomes food for other Pokémon.



#425 Drifloon

Pokémon Sun

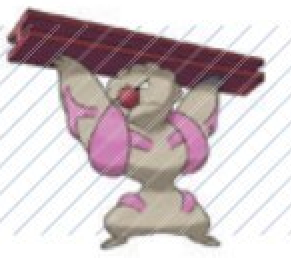
Stories go that it grabs the hands of small children and drags them away to the afterlife. It dislikes heavy children.



#478 Froslass

Pokémon Sun

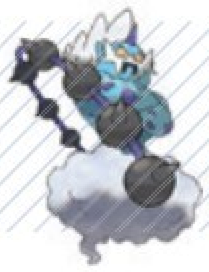
When it finds humans or Pokémon it likes, it freezes them and takes them to its chilly den, where they become decorations.



#533 Gurdurr

Pokémon Black 2 and White 2

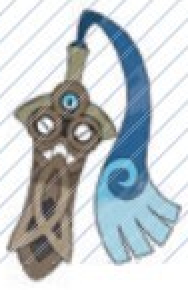
With strengthened bodies, they skillfully wield steel beams to take down buildings.



#642 Thundurus

Pokémon Black

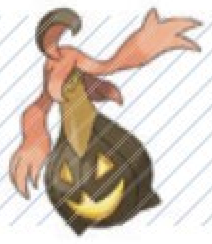
Countless charred remains mar the landscape of places through which Thundurus has passed.



#679 Honedge

Pokémon Y

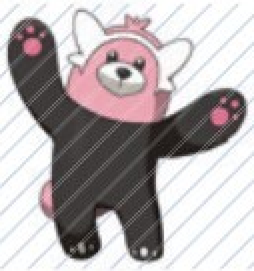
If anyone dares to grab its hilt, it wraps a blue cloth around that person's arm and drains that person's life energy completely.



#711 Gourgeist

Pokémon Y

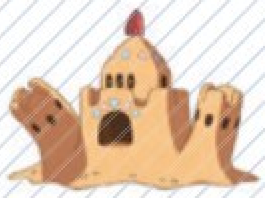
It enwraps its prey in its hairlike arms. It sings joyfully as it observes the suffering of its prey.



#760 Bewear

Pokémon Moon

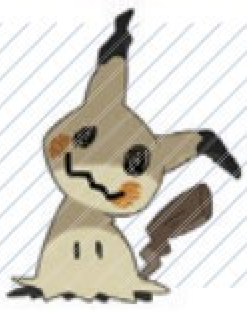
This Pokémon has the habit of hugging its companions. Many Trainers have left this world after their spines were squashed by its hug.



#770 Palossand

Pokémon Moon

Buried beneath the castle are masses of dried-up bones from those whose vitality it has drained.



#778 Mimikyu

Pokémon Ultra Moon

A gust of wind revealed what hides under this Pokémon's rag to a passing Trainer, who went home and died painfully that very night.

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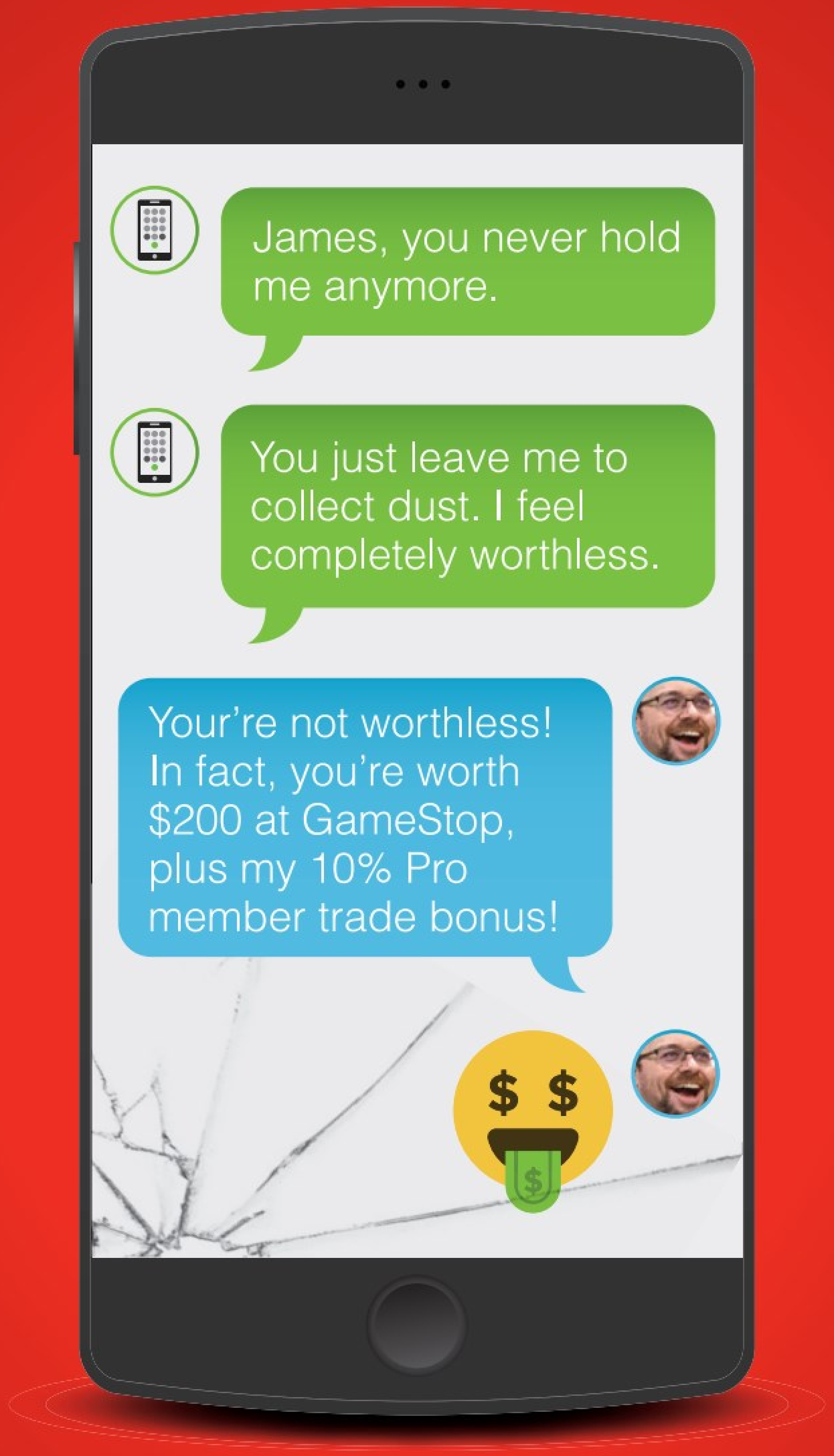

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